ABORIGINAL ADOLESCENT GIRLS: CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND RESILIENT TRAJECTORIES

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2011

Laurentian University
Université Laurentienne

Laurentian University

Thesis
presented at
Laurentian University
as partial requirement
of the Master of Social Work Program

by

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November 2011

Acknowledgements

This research project would not have been possible without the support of many people. The author wishes to express her gratitude to her supervisors, Prof. Dr. Diana Coholic and Prof. Dr. Pamela Toulouse who were abundantly helpful and offered invaluable assistance, support and guidance.

Deepest gratitude are also due to the members of the advisory panel, Jamie Davey, Gary Martin and Charnelle Knapeshesit without whose cultural knowledge and guidance this study would not have been successful. The Timmins Native Friendship Center and the Missiway Health Centre should also be acknowledged for their community support throughout this research project.

Appreciation goes out to my family and friends who have supported me by sacrificing their time and energy. Dr. A. Steele, I am very grateful for your advice, friendship and ongoing encouragement.

Finally and most importantly, special thanks goes to the six Aboriginal adolescent girls who shared their deeply personal lived experiences with the author, the group and the public so that others may learn from them.

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Introduction

I have had the privilege of working with adolescents for over 20 years in the capacity of social worker, teacher, guidance counselor, and special education resource teacher. Throughout my career I have been afforded many amazing opportunities but one of my greatest pleasures has been establishing relationships with Aboriginal adolescent girls in northern Ontario. These girls have grown up in a variety of settings from urban areas, Federal reserves and isolated communities along the James Bay coast, yet they all share common experiences and challenges. I have observed their struggles throughout the years and have been saddened by how difficult it is for so many Aboriginal girls to find their paths and comfort in their identities as they become young Aboriginal women. They often seem to be caught between two worlds: the Aboriginal cultural world and the Western world, both of which, because of the instability and lack of support therein, appear to offer a precarious foundation for their life journey. On the other hand, I have also had the fortune of knowing some Aboriginal adolescent girls who have been able to embrace their cultural world and the Western world and have been able to establish a successful, happy and productive trajectory.

It is important to understand how cultural identity formation factors are unique within the Canadian Aboriginal adolescent girl population and how they can impact their resilient trajectories so that caregivers and professionals can better support these girls in their development. This specifically entails exploring how Canadian Aboriginal adolescent girls establish positive behavioural, emotional, physical and psychological adjustment to adversity and vulnerability factors they may face throughout their lives. This research thesis describes my

efforts to understand how a small group of Aboriginal adolescent girls in northern Ontario are able to negotiate trajectories to a successful and productive life.

The process and findings of this study including the knowledge gained will hopefully inform the efforts of individuals such as parents, teachers, role models, counselors and Aboriginal communities as they seek to establish meaningful relationships with Aboriginal girls. These relationships are significant as they provide support to girls in the resolution of their challenges and provide guidance as they live through their adolescent years, solidify their identity, and embrace increasing opportunities for a successful and productive life.

The research thesis is structured in the following way. Chapter one begins with a brief review of the pertinent academic literature on the topic of Aboriginal peoples and communities in northern Ontario, adolescence and Aboriginal girls, historical background of Aboriginal peoples at the macro and micro level, the concept of youth "at risk" and resiliency, and finally the process of cultural identity formation. In Chapter two I will present the theoretical framework on which this research is based and discuss the methodology used, namely Photovoice, which is a type of Participatory Action Research (PAR) method. I will demonstrate that PAR and Photovoice are convergent with the values of Indigenous Knowledge and ethical guidelines for Aboriginal research and present the detailed process of data collection. In Chapter three I will discuss the findings of the Photovoice project including the nine aspects of the researcher-participants' lived experiences, and the emerging main theme of resiliency. In Chapter four, the vulnerability, adversity and protective factors experienced by the six researcher-participants are examined and the five indicators of resiliency that emerged from this research project are presented. Finally, in Chapter five, results are presented to help inform the future practice of social workers, practitioners and educational professionals.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

In this chapter I will review the current and relevant literature pertaining to Aboriginal peoples, with a focus on Aboriginal adolescent girls living in northern Ontario. I will begin with a brief overview of the current population statistics of Aboriginal people in Canada, followed by an examination of the literature addressing adolescence, particularly that of Aboriginal girls. Next I will present a brief historical exploration, both on the marco and the micro level, of how a colonial history has and continues to impact community and individual life trajectories for Aboriginal youth. Finally, current resiliency theory, cultural identity formation theories, and findings regarding adolescent developmental tasks will be examined to determine their relevance in understanding the challenges faced and dealt with by Aboriginal adolescent girls.

Aboriginal Peoples and Communities in Northern Ontario

Aboriginal peoples increased enrollment in the school system suggests that the their population is one of the fastest growing cohorts in Canada. In fact, the Aboriginal (registered Indians) population represents 9.28% of the total population of Northern Ontario, which includes Northwestern Ontario (District of Thunder By, Rainy River and Kenora) and Northeastern Ontario (Districts of Parry Sound, Manitoulin, Sudbury, Temiskaming, Cochrane, Algoma and the Sudbury Reginal Municipality) (Moazzami, 2003). Registered Indians are people who are registered with the federal government as Indians, according to the terms of the *Indian Act*. Registered Indians are also known as Status Indians (Statistics Canada, 2008). Approximately 17.27% of this Aboriginal population is between the ages of 10 and 19 years old, compared to 14.63% of the overall population (Moazzami, 2003). The gender split is said to be typical of other ethnic groups with females representing approximately 51% and males representing 49%

(Statistics Canada, 2008). Certainly, northern Ontario is not an anomaly; numbers are reflective of Canada's population trends as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2008).

According to the 2006 Census completed by Statistics Canada, the Aboriginal population is the fastest growing portion of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2008). Further to this, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) have projected that by 2021 the total national registered Indian population will increase by 34%, totaling just a little less than 940,000 people (INAC, 2004). Taken collectively these numbers indicate that a significant portion of northern Ontario Aboriginals are entering adolescence, a stage of life considered challenging or difficult for any young person, but perhaps more so for the young Aboriginal person. Aboriginal adolescents are attempting to resolve developmental tasks: they are simultaneously developing independence, experimenting with a variety of risk taking behaviours such as sexual activity, and drug and alcohol use. They are attempting to create life-long connections with their families and establishing a sense of identity (Filbert & Flynn, 2010). However, they are processing these issues with the added challenge of negotiating more than one culture, and a Western culture that has marginalized and oppressed their peoples. Thus, this cohort cannot be ignored as they move towards adulthood.

Adolescence and Aboriginal Girls

A search of scholarly and professional journals quickly yielded numerous studies examining and exploring the stage of adolescence and its associated developmental tasks. However, there appears to be a paucity of data specific to Canadian Aboriginal adolescents and their experiences, feelings and attitudes toward adolescence and identity formation. This is particularly true for Aboriginal adolescent girls.

Many researchers have examined adolescence and its relationship to specific issues such as suicide (Caldwell, 2008; MacNeil, 2008), substance use and abuse (Saewye, et al., 2006), early pregnancy (Shercliffe, Hampton, McKay-McNabb, Jeffery, Beattie & McWatters, 2007; Banister & Begoray, 2006), educational status (van der Woerd & Cox, 2003; Brady, 1996; Knesting, 2008; Bazylak, 2002), and how each relates to adolescence. Many researchers have also examined ethnic and cultural identity formation (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003; Beale-Spencer & Markstromo-Adams, 1990; Newman, 2005; Groom, 1995; Jensen, 2003; Arthur & Collins, 2010). Of relevance to the study described herein, researchers found that Aboriginal youth tend to experience greater risk factors in a variety of these areas (Shercliffe et al., 2007; Banister & Begoray, 2006). For example, Canadian Aboriginal youth have the highest rate of suicide of any identified cultural group in the world (MacNeil, 2008). Aboriginal youth in Canada also have significantly lower graduation rates than those of the general population. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples found that only 37% of Aboriginal youth graduated from high school, and 9% of these graduates entered university with only a 3% completion rate (Bazylak, 2002). In 2001, the British Columbia Ministry of Education noted that the primary reasons for elevated Aboriginal female dropout rates were pregnancy and parenthood (van der Woerd & Cox, 2003). Furthermore, across Canada, Aboriginal youth are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, in the child welfare system, and are at higher risk for early exposure to problematic alcohol/drug use (Public Safety Canada, 2008).

It should be noted that many of the studies cited above did not take a qualitative approach in exploring the Aboriginal cultural variable but instead quantitatively revealed various statistics with regards to Aboriginal youth risk factors (Shercliffe et al., 2007; Banister & Begoray, 2006). Qualitative studies could offer more in-depth information regarding the lived experiences of

Aboriginal youth and how they, as individuals, are impacted on an emotional, physical, psychological, social or cultural level by these risk factors. According to Kirmayer, Brass and Tait (2000, p.607), Indigenous people around the world have experienced "cultural discontinuity [and it] has been linked to high rates of depression, alcoholism, suicide and violence in many communities, with the most profound impact on [Indigenous] youth".

Historical factors have contributed to the challenges that many Aboriginal people and communities face and are, in most cases, directly responsible for many of the vulnerability factors and adversities that Aboriginal adolescent girls must resolve in order to achieve positive adaptation. In the next section, I further explore some of the historical, or macro factors, that can shape Aboriginal girls' experiences of adolescence.

Historical Background: Macro Level

The research on Aboriginal adolescent girls suggests that to fully understand their lived experiences, both a macro and micro level approach must be taken. In order to understand Aboriginal girls on an individual (or micro) level one must be cognizant of the historical background of the North American Indigenous culture as a whole.

The history of Indigenous peoples is marked by oppression and discrimination in the form of European colonialism and imposed residential schooling and genocide. It is estimated that over 7,000,000 Indigenous people inhabited North America prior to the arrival of Europeans, and close to 90% of North American Aboriginals died as a result of direct and indirect effects of cultural contact (Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2000). Various infectious diseases such as smallpox, measles and scarlet fever are some of the pathological causes of these deaths. Indigenous people were also exposed to a European diet that continues to impact on their health today as evidenced by the high levels of obesity and diabetes in many Aboriginal communities (INAC, 2003).

Furthermore, over the last 150 years the Canadian government has developed and implemented policies pertaining to Federal reserves and mandatory residential schools, both of which dramatically contributed to the marginalization of the Aboriginal population. For example, Aboriginal peoples were forced to live on land chosen by the government "out of the way of the colonizers' expanding cities and farms" (Kirmayer, et al., 2000, p. 608) and were often grouped together with different Aboriginal clans. These new living systems were coupled with groups that had little history of living together and widely varied cultural norms and practices (Kirmayer, et al., 2000). Aboriginal people never saw themselves as a homogeneous group or a national collective. Instead "the idea and the image of the 'Indian' is a White conceptual-ization" (Frideres, 2008, p.320). European settlers categorized them as "other" and as such defined the Aboriginal people as less than civilized (Frideres, 2008).

The Residential School policy was the primary governmental initiative to assimilate the Aboriginal culture. The government's establishment of residential schools was based on the overwhelming belief that Aboriginal peoples were savages who "needed to be 'civilized' to join the rest of Canadian society" (Kirmayer, et al., 2000, p. 608). It is believed that over 100,000 Aboriginal Canadian children were taken from their homes between 1879 and 1973, and forced to attend residential schools (Kirmayer, et al., 2000). These children were forbidden to speak their language or practice any of their cultural traditions. The church-run residential schools insisted that each child learn the English language. They were also forced to espouse Christian values and practice European traditions. This colonial ideology saw Aboriginal young people as exploitable and even dispensable (Downe, 2006).

The residential school experience had a profound impact on Aboriginal children. They were placed in environments without their families and culture, and were often exposed to

physical, emotional and sexual abuse. These indecencies were done at the hands of those who felt that their parents were "uncivilized". The impact of residential schools is even more far-reaching as it "denied Aboriginal communities the basic human right to transmit their traditions and maintain their cultural identity" (Kirmayer, et al., 2000, p. 608). As such, these Aboriginal children never experienced family life. Traditional Aboriginal parenting practices and communication skills were often lost and to this day this loss continues to impact Aboriginal culture and individuals. Residential schools destroyed the Aboriginal identity of children. Their struggle with identity continues today and many Aboriginal young adults identify themselves as "residential school survivors" because they continue to live the multilayered, rippled effect of their parents' experiences at residential school (Frideres, 2008).

It is also important to recognize that colonial ideology was androcentric, that is, it was an ideology that operated from a male-dominated point of view. In government documents all references to the Aboriginal child is singular and masculine. For example, the 1889 Annual report of the Department of Indian Affairs stated that residential schools "reclaim him from uncivilized state in which he has been brought up" (Downe, 2006, p.3) Moreover, as outlined in the Indian Act of 1876, an Aboriginal woman's legal and cultural status was revoked if she married a non-Aboriginal man or if she pursued a university education. Colonialism sought to destroy Aboriginal identity by targeting the most vulnerable and those whose roles were integral to passing on cultural identity (Downe, 2006).

Not only have these initiatives severely impacted several generations of Aboriginal families but the Canadian Aboriginal culture as a whole has been pushed to the margins of Canadian society and seen as a problem (Frideres, 2008). According to MacNeil (2008, p.6) "[r]esearch indicates that colonial policies related to residential schools, reserve communities,

loss of traditional lands, and erosion of language and cultural traditions that lead to cultural continuity have created a loss of cohesion and identity in Aboriginal communities which have impacted family health behaviours".

Finally, I will note that in the 1960's, when residential schools were being phased out, the Canadian government's oppressive agenda continued under a different but equally traumatizing guise using child protection agencies. In the mid-sixties Children's Aid Societies were making the transition from private, charitable organizations to government funded and operated agencies. Unfortunately, they were operated with the similar patriarchal, colonial and oppressive agenda.

During this time Native children were being born to residential school survivors who had been deprived of learning basic parenting and nurturing skills, thus creating a new generation of Aboriginal children who in the government's view needed to be aided and protected. "Unfortunately, Children's Aid Societies intervened in these traumatized and lost families, not by helping Native families and their communities but by continuing the colonial residential school tradition of removing, suppressing and assimilating First Nations through their children" (Lederman, 1999, p.64). This was known as the "60's Scoop" because there was a generation of children literally scooped up and placed in white foster homes far away from their families and communities, which created another generation of disempowered and disenfranchised individuals. Statistics vary across Canada, however, it is clear that there was a vastly disproportionate number of Aboriginal children in foster care compared to white children (Wagames, 2009). The number of Aboriginal children in care in 1980 constituted 4.6% of all Native status children – four and a half times the national average (Lederman, 1999). Children's Aid Society social workers, although for the most part caring and well intentioned, worked from a ubiquitous platform of racism and cultural imperialism, further contributing to the cycle of

traumatization of Native people. It certainly is not difficult to understand why Aboriginal peoples and communities continue to have high levels of distrust for teachers and social workers.

Historical Background: Micro Level

Obviously, the loss of one's cultural traditions, language, familial relationships and so forth are going to impact all levels of one's life experience. The cultural disconnect described above filters down and creates a severe loss at the individual (micro) level and impacts each person's ability to adjust to change, make positive decisions, and develop a strong, healthy sense of identity (MacNeil, 2008). Other researchers have referred to this phenomenon as intergenerational or multi-generational trauma. This occurs when the effects of trauma are not resolved in one generation: when trauma is ignored and there is no support for dealing with it, the trauma will be passed from one generation to the next (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). While not all Aboriginal adolescents struggle with inter-generational trauma and follow unhealthy trajectories, a significant number of researchers have concluded that many Aboriginal adolescents continue to show signs of being "at risk".

Banister and Begoray (2006, p.169) stated that "while the general adolescent population is already at risk for poor health, the health problems are even more pronounced in Aboriginal communities". These risks are specifically linked to sexual health, relationship health, alcohol use, risk for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, unplanned pregnancy, and contacting sexually transmitted diseases. The Public Health Agency of Canada (2004) stated that Aboriginal people are being infected with HIV at higher rates and at younger ages compared to non-Aboriginal persons. According to the University of Western Ontario report, "In the Best Interest of Girls: Phase 2", "75% of Aboriginal women under the age of 18 have experienced sexual abuse and half of those are under 14 years of age" (Jaffe & Hughes, 2008, p.17). As well, the 2001 British

Columbia Ministry of Education study reported that 61% of Aboriginal youth did not graduate from high school within six years of beginning grade eight (van der Woerd & Cox, 2003).

Furthermore, MacNeil (2008, p.1) stated that "Aboriginal adolescent suicide in Canada is of epidemic proportions." Unfortunately, and despite much study, intervention and money, suicide rates continue to rise within this group (MacNeil, 2008). Caldwell (2008), referring to the Canadian Institute for Child Health, stated that Aboriginal youth are five to seven times more likely to commit suicide than non-Aboriginal youth. Moreover, Caldwell (2008, p.145) stated that "[y]oung women in First Nations registered a rate of 35 suicides per 100,000 versus only 5 suicides per 100,000 for other Canadian women. In 1999, suicide accounted for no less than 35% of all death in First Nations youth aged 10-19 years."

At Risk versus Resilience

The "at risk" label has been used by researchers and practitioners in the literature for many years and "has become a general term to describe young people on a trajectory toward a myriad of problems that threaten their present and future adjustment" (Schonert-Reichl, 2000, p.3). For years researchers have attempted to identify the factors and antecedents that put youth and children in the "at risk" category (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Their overall goal has been to find the 'problem', thus focusing on the negative. As further noted by McWhirter, J., McWhirter, B., McWhirter , A. and McWhirter, E. (1998, p. 6) " the 'at risk' term is used to denote a set of presumed cause-and-effect dynamics that place the child or adolescent in danger of negative future events." It is clear that Aboriginal adolescents are often "at risk" and information and data pertaining to "at risk youth" is plentiful. However, in most cases the research is not specific to the Aboriginal population.

More recently, there has been a shift in the approach of the research addressing "at risk" youth. Instead of only looking for the vulnerability factors (problems) researchers are now exploring and documenting various protective factors that can lead youth to resilient trajectories or positive adjustments to the adversities they face in their lives. As noted by many researchers, central to this shift in paradigm is the focus on positive adaptational outcomes and what has led to them (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Garmezy, Masten & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar & Zigler, 1991). As a result, there is a further shift that emphasizes prevention as opposed to the reactive, "picking up the pieces" once an individual experiences negative outcomes and/or emotional or behavioural maladjustment.

Accordingly, some of the most recent resilience research focuses on strengths and structural factors and as such, the construct of resilience is defined throughout much of this research as "a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p.858). It is important to note that resilience is not viewed as a personality trait that is innate. Social scientists have made it clear that protective personal "attributes are not indelibly implanted in children; rather they are substantially shaped by life circumstances" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p.863). This explains why many researchers are using terms such as "resilient adaptation", "resilient profiles" or "resilient trajectories" instead of "resilient youth" which implies a characteristic trait (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Researchers are now focused on additional learning about individual positive adaptation or adjustment despite experiencing trauma or vulnerability factors and how communities can best support youth who are "at risk".

Many social scientists and social organizations have embraced this resilience paradigm and are conducting extensive research in order to develop preventative and proactive programs

and approaches to assist vulnerable populations. For example, the McCreary Centre Society of British Columbia and the Canadian Red Cross are two such organizations that are targeting vulnerable youth in their research. In order to focus their research they have considered a multitude of factors that contribute to and impact the concept of resiliency. As a result, these researchers have identified four main aspects of resilience outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Resiliency: Four Main Aspects

Vulnerability Factors	Markers that are defined as aspects of one's life and personality that can exacerbate negative life circumstances and lead to adjustment difficulties. These may include such factors as gender, age, intelligence and many more (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Saewye, Wang, Chittendend, Murphy & The McCreary Centre Society, 2006).
Adversity	"[R]eferred to as risk, typically encompasses negative life circumstances that are known to be statistically associated with adjustment difficulties" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p.858) It should be noted that many researchers have combined vulnerability factors and adversity into the same category. Adversity may include such stressors as physical and sexual abuse, family substance abuse, violence and frequent moves.
Protective Factors	Aspects of one's life and personality that can positively alleviate the impact on adversity and vulnerability factors. (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Saewye et al., 2006). These may include such factors as having a connectedness with a positive role model, positive peer relationships, assertiveness, access to school and education, sense of safety and security.
Resilient Adaptation/Trajectories	Viewed as positive behavioural, emotional, physical and psychological adjustment to adversity and vulnerability factors (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Saewye et al., 2006).

The Canadian Red Cross program, which is part of the International Resilience Project (IPR) led by researchers at Dalhousie University, has found that "resiliency is enhanced by

different layers of our experience; the individual, relationships, community and culture" (Canadian Red Cross, 2006, p.2). This indicates that there are multiple fluid levels of vulnerability and protective factors that interplay with each other resulting in multiple levels of positive and negative adjustment. Therefore, applying the resiliency framework means attempting to decipher how "each layer interacts and collectively enhances or decreases resiliency depending on systems and supports" (Canadian Red Cross, 2006, p.2). Instead of being a single construct, resiliency may indeed be fluid and changeable.

Moreover, Unger et al., (2008) found that resilience varies across context and culture. Therefore, the definition of positive outcomes will be different across cultures and even within those cultures depending on each individual's circumstances. Not only does the nature of positive outcomes vary so does the processes through which they are achieved. According to Unger et al. (2008) there are two main and equally important processes that explain resilience. The first is an individual's ability to navigate his or her way to resources, and the second is the resources made available to them through their family and community. Both of these processes will be reflective of the individual's context and culture and will be inter-dependent as community resources must be available in order for the individual to demonstrate personal agency. It is therefore important to understand that there is a plurality of signifiers associated with resilient adaptations and a wide variety of ways to get there (Unger et al., 2008). For example, a study conducted by Dei, Massuca, McIsaac and Zine (1997) found that the phenomenon of dropping out of high school for black youth in Toronto (Ontario) was actually an act of resilience. Dropping out was viewed as "a response to the oppressive conditions that constrain cultural identity and the development of a healthy sense of self' (Unger et al., 2008, p. 176). As such, researchers must avoid generalization or standardizing measurements of resilience as it can result in inaccurate, unreliable results if

there is a lack of consideration for the various intersecting factors and 'layers' in each individual's life.

Cultural Identity Formation

As noted by the Dalhousie researchers above, and researchers such as Dei et al. (1977), culture is one of the 'layers' of experience that can contribute to adolescents' resilient trajectories. However, acknowledging this cultural layer adds further complexity to the adolescent identity formation process. Depending on the individual and their experiences, this cultural layer could help and/or could hinder their ability to develop effective adaptation and coping skills. Clearly the establishment of identity is extremely important because the individual develops a distinct personality that defines them to others and themselves, and brings about a personal sense of continuity, uniqueness and affiliation. This identity then serves as "a critical function for the individual's manifest competence and adaptive functioning" (Beale-Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990, p.290). Therefore, in the case of Aboriginal adolescent girls, it is important to examine how the cultural layer impacts Aboriginal identity formation of young girls and how it could act as a protective factor through their adolescence and into adulthood.

Certainly, identity formation is an important process for all adolescents. However, it can be particularly complicated for ethnic and racial minority groups as the cultural layer brings with it a plethora of factors. According to Beal-Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990), identity formation becomes quite complex when an individual must also navigate colour, physical differences, language differences, differing cultural traditions and even social stereotypes. According to Groome (1995, p.10), individual Aboriginal youth will be impacted by the above factors to varying degrees and will also be influenced by the five major 'worlds' impinging on their lives: the family, the Aboriginal community, the wider society, peers and the school. Each

of these 'worlds' brings with them a variety of expectations regarding "values, beliefs, behaviours and differing patterns of control, relationships and communication" (Groome, 1995, p.13). Frideres (2008) suggests that one can conceptualize these many worlds and how an individual reconciles them as 'nested'. Frideres (2008, p.314) believes that one may "identify with and hold allegiance to smaller communities (e.g., ethnic groups), while being nested within a larger community".

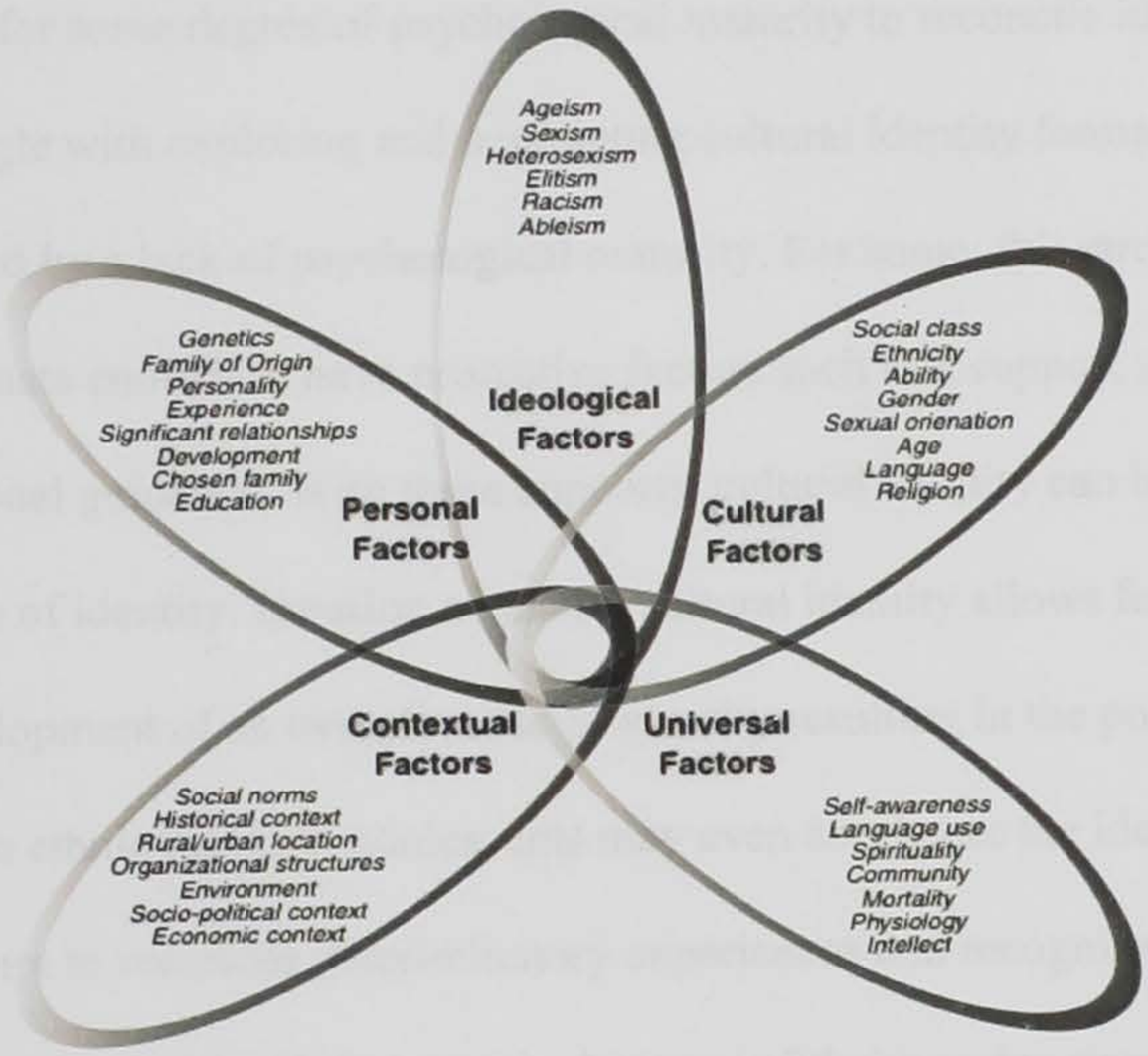
More recently and with further research in the area of identity formation, Arthur and Collins (2010) created a visual representation of the many cultural identity factors that may impact an individual's personal identity. These factors included cultural factors, personal identity factors, contextual factors, universal factors and ideological factors. Figure 1, as developed by Sandra Collins, outlines the description of each factor. It is in the image of a kaleidoscope as it "captures the fluid, dynamic and interactive nature of the various factors" (Arthur & Collins, 2010, p.70). Each individual will experience cultural identity development differently because interaction between all five factors will be unique to them. In other words, each individual will internalize their experiences with the five cultural factors and develop their own unique cultural kaleidoscopes (Arthur & Collins, 2010).

It is important to note that although an individual may internalize their cultural identity, one's cultural identity does not necessarily remain static as each new interaction with the world and/or specific factor can cause change in values, perspectives and behaviours. Therefore, every individual can be an active participant "in the shaping of personal and collective culture, rather than passive products of external enculturation" (Arthur & Collins, 2010, p.71). Furthermore, because cultural identity formation is so individualized and personal, overgeneralization and

stereotyping must be avoided because "within-group differences may sometimes be as significant as between-group differences" (Arthur & Collins, 2010, p.71).

Figure 1

Factors influencing cultural identity



(Reproduced with permission of Sandra Collins, 2010)

No matter the model of cultural identity formation, all of these factors, layers and worlds must be negotiated and explored by each individual Aboriginal adolescent. This is no doubt a daunting task for Aboriginal adolescents, as it requires a conscious formation process and therefore some degree of psychological maturity. In addition to the varied layers and factors, the process becomes even more difficult because they often "face a barrage of messages that are frequently contradictory and often antagonistic to them and their communities. Even supportive voices may be oppositional to each other" (Groome, 1995, p.7). Unfortunately, and as a result, Aboriginal adolescents are often at risk of developing a "failure identity" (Groome, 1995),

experiencing significant personal confusion and difficulty finding a comfortable and safe nesting spot.

Failure identity impacts all areas of an Aboriginal adolescent girl's life, creating great instability by halting or delaying psychological maturation. Therein lies the conflict: there is a need for some degree of psychological maturity to reconcile identity, and at the same time the struggle with exploring and negotiating cultural identity formation and its many layers is often caused by a lack of psychological maturity. For some, this struggle may be lessened if they are fortunate enough to have protective factors such as a support system that offers cultural and personal guidance. With these supports, cultural identity can be well integrated into an overall sense of identity. Creating a healthy cultural identity allows for further integration and development of an overall sense of identity resulting in the possibility of psychological maturity. Some ethnic minority adolescents may even accelerate the identity formation process as they attempt to reconcile discriminatory experiences and recognize the need to achieve self-coherence (Newman, 2005). Unfortunately, because of their need to negotiate the various borders between their worlds, this does not always occur.

Not only are Aboriginal adolescent girls negotiating these various borders, many girls face a multitude of vulnerability factors and adversities such as poor community support, weak family connections and or/discriminatory ethnic experiences (Shercliffe et al., 2007; Banister & Begoray, 2006). Consequently, many Aboriginal adolescent girls experience an increased sense of powerlessness, frustration, failure and limited psychological maturation (Groome, 1995; Newman, 2005). Adolescents who triumph over the numerous negative pressures often acknowledge some level of support and guidance from one or more of their five major 'worlds'. Those adolescents are more likely to follow resilient trajectories and develop positive

behavioural, emotional and physical adjustment to adversity and vulnerability factors (Groome, 1995; Newman, 2005).

Conclusion

It is clear from the current population statistics that Aboriginal youth are a growing cohort in Canadian society and in northern Ontario in particular and therefore cannot be ignored. Adolescence and its associated developmental tasks present many typical challenges such as establishing educational goals, developing intimate relationships and negotiating personal values and morals. Aboriginal youth are also challenged by the far-reaching effects of a colonial history marked with oppression and discrimination. As such they are often labeled "at risk" and are faced with higher rates of suicide, teen pregnancy, and drug and alcohol abuse. Therefore, developing a strong sense of identity and establishing a resilient trajectory can be difficult for Aboriginal youth.

While there is substantial literature and research that addressed 'at risk' youth, resiliency theory and identity formation models, we know little about the identity formation and resiliency of Canadian Aboriginal adolescent girls. The purpose of the qualitative study described herein is to gain a better understanding how the process of cultural identity formation impacts Aboriginal adolescent girls' trajectories through adolescence and into young adulthood specifically in northern Ontario. Research that gives insight into the meaning of the lived experiences of Aboriginal adolescent girls, as perceived and shared by them, is a valuable endeavor. Such research can assist in the identification of specific issues that impact Aboriginal adolescent girls' development in northern Ontario whether they grow up in urban areas, on Federal reserves or isolated communities along the James Bay coast.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

In this chapter I present the theoretical framework on which this research is based. I also discuss relevant literature pertaining to Participatory Action Research (PAR), and more specifically the Photovoice strategy. Further I demonstrate that PAR and Photovoice are convergent with the values of Indigenous Knowledge and ethical guidelines for Aboriginal research. The preparation for data collection is described under the headings: study area; community involvement; advisory panel; recruitment and selection of researcher-participants; characteristics of participants; and ethics and consent. Finally, collection of study data is detailed under the headings: data sources and study timelines.

Theoretical Framework

Social Constructivism

Considering the qualitative and socially-based nature of this research, the study draws on a social constructionist epistemology and utilized Photovoice, which is a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Social constructivism posits that humans shape knowledge and meaning in their lives through interactions with others. These interactions are subjective, complex and varied, most often follow the historical and cultural norms of their community, and assign meaning accordingly (Creswell, 2009). Using social constructivism in this study complements the cultural framework of Indigenous Knowledge. "Indigenous Knowledge engages a holistic paradigm that acknowledges the emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental well-being of a people [and] is attached to the language, landscapes and cultures from which it emerges" (Martin-Hill & Soucy, 2005, p.11) This study attempts to make sense of the meanings Aboriginal adolescent

girls construct in the world in which they live; they "will be the intellectual investigators and contributors" (Martin-Hill & Soucy, 2005, p.13). Therefore this study draws on socialconstructivism and Indigenous Knowledge as epistemological frameworks in order to interpret how the girls' historical and cultural settings, and their social experiences therein, impact the complexity of their personal perspectives and views (Creswell, 2009)

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

In order to accomplish PAR with respect and dignity for its participants, it is of paramount importance to be aware of the power structure inherent in the investigative process. In his renowned book, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, Robert Chambers (1997) questioned the power imbalance inherent in many community development initiatives. Chambers (1997) noted that when it comes to analyzing community problems and designing projects to address them, data and recommendations put forth by those in power ('uppers') are more highly valued than the recommendations of those who will be impacted by them ('lowers'). These top-down approaches of professionals working within a post-positivist framework usually include the use of statistics, experiments and clinical assessments and are considered 'official' and often superior to the voices of the community and local people. Therefore, many decisions affecting a community are made by 'outsiders' or 'uppers' who will never have to experience or live with the consequences of the changes they have imposed (Chambers, 1997). In the end, those whose voices have not been heeded become even further disenfranchised and shut out.

The question then becomes: how does the research community give voice to those who have been marginalized? Certainly, those who have been marginalized must be given this voice

in such a way that they feel valued and respected rather than exploited. It was not until the 1980's that the PAR strategy emerged, with its inherent goal to capture the voice of ordinary people. Contrary to the philosophies of positivism or post-positivism that are grounded in 'scientific method', PAR grew out of grassroots activist movements as a form of inclusive advocacy. PAR "holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda" (Creswell, 2009, p.9). "Participatory Appraisal and Evaluation Techniques (PAE or PLA for Participatory Learning Appraisal), originally known as PRA (participatory rural appraisal) originated in the global south, rapidly gained popularity and spread across the globe" (Cahill, 2007, p.297). Researchers, working in the dual role to include development workers, used local materials and strategies that fit the needs of specific communities. Because these strategies did not discriminate against age, gender, literacy levels, or sexual orientation the researchers were able to collect significant community-based data in short periods of time with the participation of many voices without further disenfranchising the community itself.

Of course, there are many definitions of participation in research and as a social science researcher using PAR, one must be aware that participation is not a static concept, but rather a fluid spectrum that can range from tokenism to empowerment. According to Biggs (1989), "collegiate participation" is a true form of PAR. If the PAR strategy is collegial in nature, then researchers and local people work together as collaborators with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have control over the process (Biggs, 1989).

The purpose of PAR includes an agenda for collecting data and putting the newly acquired knowledge into action. Furthermore, PAR can engender change at a variety of levels;

change that can impact individual participants, communities, and even institutions. What sets this qualitative research methodology apart is the strong belief that the data collected through PAR is greatly enhanced by the involvement of those being studied. From an ethical standpoint, the intentional involvement of those who are normally excluded from the process of knowledge production and policy-making (Frisby, Reid, Millar & Hoeber, 2005) reduces the likelihood of exploitation and community harm. Furthermore, PAR affirms the right to have a voice and to have control over knowledge production and decision-making (Frisby et al., 2005).

PAR is convergent with Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) or Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), since all of these methods promote the belief that the 'researched' must be involved in some, or all, stages of the research process (Cahill, 2007; Frisby et al., 2005). Torre and Fine (2006) stated that PAR starts with the individuals who have experienced and lived a particular issue and maintains a logical and strongly held belief that individuals have a profound knowledge about their lived experiences and should be the ones shaping the questions, deciding on appropriate data collection methods, analyzing, interpreting and applying the results. This approach stands in contrast to the expert-researcher, arm's length approach found in research methods such as questionnaires, surveys and interviews. In PAR, the power belongs to the participant-researchers and the research is done 'with' and not 'on' or 'for' the participants. Effective PAR ensures that participants own the process and are involved in defining the focus and purpose of the project from the ground up, making them not just subjects and informants but agents of change (Cahill, 2007). This change can come in a variety of forms

from, for example, an educational strategy for communities with high rates of teen pregnancy to a group letter writing campaign lobbying government for changes in the Youth Criminal Act.

Aboriginal Participatory Action Research

Sadly, for many marginalized groups in Canada, collaborative participation has not been the approach most often used. The Aboriginal Peoples of Canada know this well:

> Unfortunately, many Aboriginal people have been the subjects of research that they had little say in or control over, that misrepresented or misinterpreted their experiences, and failed to create knowledge that was useful to the community.
> (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2003, p.5)

In the past, data have been extracted, analyzed, published and never returned to Aboriginal communities (Caslteden & Garvin, 2008). Researchers, known as 'bleed and leave researchers', have simply 'parachuted in', taken what information they needed and left without concern about the impact their interpretations and misinterpretations could have on the individuals and the community itself. Thus, "the historical imbalance of power, deep-seated mistrust, racism and lack of control between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of Canada has also permeated the research process, fostering the need to identify effective and culturally appropriate research tools" (Castleden & Garvin, 2008, p.1394). As a result, guidelines for conducting research with Aboriginal peoples and communities that are convergent with the values and practices of a PAR have been established. For instance, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) in collaboration with its Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health have developed ethical research guidelines. This consultative effort resulted in a set of guidelines that assist researchers and institutions in conducting ethical and culturally appropriate research

involving Aboriginal people (CIHR, 2007). Article three of the CIHR guidelines states that Aboriginal communities should always be given the option of a participatory-research approach. "The affected community and its members should be involved at all stages of the research process, from formulating projects and methods, through determining research outcomes and to interpreting and disseminating results" (CIHR, 2007, p.19). In order to create an opportunity for a participatory-research approach and facilitate communication and meaningful consultation, the guidelines suggest that it is very important to establish relationships with community members and leaders.

Although I am not a member of the Aboriginal community, through my experience as a social worker and high school teacher I have had the opportunity to establish strong relationships with Aboriginal community members and leaders in northeastern Ontario. Certainly, through the Photovoice process, further relationships have been forged and strong partnerships established.

Photovoice: A PAR Strategy

Photovoive is a relevant and powerful PAR strategy for Aboriginal peoples and communities as it allows those involved to create their own narratives through photos. They are empowered to tell their own stories as Photovoice acknowledges their expertise.

Photovoice refers to the use of photographs to document participant's everyday realities. Photovoice was originally developed by Wang and Burris (l994) in the field of health promotions and education as a method of creating personal and community change. Wang (l999) identified several key concepts: images teach; pictures can influence policy; community people ought to

participate in shaping public policy; and Photovoice emphasizes individual and community action.

> Photovoice values the knowledge put forth by people as a vital source of expertise. It confronts a fundamental problem of community assessment: what professionals, researchers, specialist and outsiders think is important may completely fail to match what the community thinks is important. (Wang, C., 2007, p.63)

Photography in social science research is not a new strategy. Indeed, some social work pioneers relied heavily on photographic technology in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Those early social workers are also known as sociological or social photographers and include individuals such as Lewis Wicks Hine, Jacob Riis, Dorothea Lange and Paul Kellogg. Lewis Hine "felt that his images were most convincing when combined with carefully crafted captions and narratives" (Huff, 1998, p.597). Beginning in the early 1910's, Hines traveled the United States documenting industrial exploitation of women and children. His photographs and accompanying narratives were a powerful tool used to help debate child labour laws and the eventual passage of legislation to protect children (Huff, 1998; Szto et al., 2005). Paul Kellogg created photo essays devoted to issues and reform crusades in public welfare, psychiatric practice and public education. It was at the Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1909 that Lewis Hines stated "The greatest advance in social work is to be made by the popularizing of camera work, so these records may be made by those who are in the thick of the battle" (Huff, 1998, p.581). The most significant difference between the photographs presented in the early 1900s and those made today is not what appears in front of the camera but who is behind the lens. In keeping with the PAR framework, Photovoice employs a strategy that ensures cameras are provided not to health specialists, policy makers or professionals but to people with least access

to those who make decisions affecting their lives. Photographs are taken by participants and are used to evoke their own narratives. The photographs create a "jumping-off point" for critical discussion of issues; they allow for a participatory group process to assemble personal and community knowledge to develop solutions, and the photos provide a powerful visual means to share expertise and create effective public health policy (Castleden & Garvin, 2008).

The term "Photovoice", first introduced by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burtis, was created to identify a process whereby participants' photographs are used "as a catalyst to engage participants (those typically less powerful) and policy-makers (those typically with more power) in group dialogue for social change" (Castleden & Garvin, 2008, p.1395). There are some criticisms of the Photovoice method, the most common of which is that it can be an intrusive activity demanding specific ethical considerations at every stage of implementation (Wang, 2007). Perhaps ideally, a PAR/Photovoice project should begin at the request of the participants. It may also evolve when a researcher or practitioner is involved with a group of people who have common concerns or issues and are interested in change and action. Even if the onset of the project does not take this form, the process should be collaborative in nature and should include as many different relevant 'voices' as possible.

The initial meetings should establish that all participants are researchers and that all researchers' ideas, thoughts and beliefs regarding the research process and results will be respected. By creating a safe and secure environment all participants are given power and responsibility over the Photovoice project. Although the goal is to equally share power and responsibility, in most Photovoice projects it is impossible to eliminate all structural hierarchies.

There is most often a need for a lead-researcher who will, especially in the beginning, help guide the new participant-researchers. However, in order to further authenticate the research process and empower its members, many lead-researchers will come to the first meetings without a well defined research question or specific research goal. Instead, through shared discussions of their experiences, feelings and beliefs the entire group brings focus to their research project by developing one or more research questions (Frisby, et al., 2005). Once the research question(s) is established, participant-researchers take part in training sessions that discuss the ethical considerations, the processes and the stages of the Photovoice method. From that point on it is very important for participant-researchers to know that they are able to take the project in any direction they chose.

Preparation for Data Collection

Study Area

The Aboriginal adolescent girl Photovoice research project took place in Timmins, Ontario, a community of 45,000 people, approximately 800 kilometers north of Toronto. According to Census Canada, the Aboriginal population of Timmins is growing significantly as a result of both birth rates and migration from remote communities along the Ontario coast of James and Hudson Bay (Statistics Canada, 2008). The Photovoice group sharing sessions took place in the Aboriginal Student Lodge at Timmins High & Vocational School. Most girls were familiar with this setting and felt comfortable and safe in this location. It was also a very convenient location as four of the girls attended the school and the other two attended a school

only three blocks away. Most meetings were held at 3:30 p.m. thereby alleviating stress caused by transportation issues.

Community Involvement

The goals of Photovoice are the sharing of power, trust and ownership that are intrinsically linked to one another (Castleden, 2008), which makes it a highly appropriate method of inquiry for Aboriginal communities and peoples. Many Aboriginal communities, including the urban Aboriginal population, have been researched excessively leading to what some call "research fatigue" (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2003). When Aboriginal communities suffer from research fatigue, they can develop mistrust, the inability to communicate, outright boycotting of the research, and skepticism about where the information ends up and what it is used for.

As a result of poor research practices with Aboriginal peoples in the past, ethical considerations for this project included the establishment of trust, transparency, reciprocity and healthy dialogue between the lead student-researcher (Kelly Pearce), the researcher-participants and their community (Martin-Hill & Soucy, 2005). Accordingly, I collaborated with two Aboriginal community organizations for this project: The Timmins Native Friendship Centre (TNFC), and the Misiway Milopemahtesewin Community Health Centre. The TNFC is the largest service provider for urban Aboriginals in the Timmins area. In recognition of the ever changing society in which we live, they remain dedicated to improving the quality of the lives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the community. The TNFC philosophy is one that encompasses all people in the community who request assistance. The Centre embraces its

responsibility in creating positive changes and building a bridge of understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (www.tnfc.ca/).

Another cooperating agency was the Misiway Milopemahtesewin Community Health Centre, which was established to provide quality programs and services that honour, respect and support Aboriginal culture, values and healing practices, complimented by Western approaches to primary health care. Through education, promotion and service delivery, the Misiway Milopemahtesewin Community Health Centre encourages individuals, families, and communities to integrate and balance their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs, become aware of lifestyle choices that impede and/or enhance her/his state of health and wellness, establish respectful and collaborative relationships with health care providers and other external resources and adopt a pro-active approach and self-empowerment/self-help model (www.misiway.ca/).

A presentation clearly outlining the goals, ethical considerations and nature of the Photovoice study and possible benefits to the community was delivered to the executive director of the TNFC on Friday, October 21st, 2010, and to the executive director of Misiway on Tuesday, October 19th, 2010. Each organization's ethical protocols were discussed and have been adhered to for this project (see Appendix A for letters of support). Neither of these agencies were asked for financial support but instead were made aware of the project in order to establish trust and transparency within the community. If they were approached by individuals within the community, they could then inform them that each agency felt it was a worthwhile endeavor.

Advisory Panel

To further ensure trust and credibility I felt it was important to establish an advisory panel to act as my sounding board and to provide concrete cultural knowledge and experience. All three

members of the advisory panel, Gary Martin, Jamie Davey and Charnelle Kapeshesit, were well-respected community members and acknowledged role models for Aboriginal youth in their community. I recruited these three individuals based on my professional experience with each. Gary Martin is a health promoter for Misiway Milopemahtesewin Community Health Centre. He is well respected within both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community for his leadership and is the current chair of the Timmins Native Friendship Center. Jamie Davey is an Aboriginal youth counselor with District School Board Ontario North East. Jamie grew up in Moose Factory, Ontario and moved to Timmins to complete her high school education. She went on to graduate from the photography program at Fanshaw College. In her role as Aboriginal youth counselor she is involved in the development, promotion and implementation of many cultural programs and events. Jamie is also a member of the TNFC board. Charnelle Kapeshesit is a very community-minded 17-year-old Aboriginal adolescent who grew up in Moose Factory, Ontario and who also came to Timmins in order to complete her high school education. As a youth leader, Charnelle participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission event in Timmins, Ontario in late 2010. She has since shared this experience with a variety of student groups and other community organizations.

The advisory panel met as a group for the first time on Monday, November 1st, 2010 to discuss the recruitment process, possible meeting places, and time frames for the project. They also provided input regarding the possibility of including cultural rituals such as smudging before each meeting. All members were very supportive of the project, looked forward to the process and agreed to have their names appear in this thesis. In order to ensure confidentiality for all researcher-participants in this study, they were asked to sign a Consent and Confidentiality Form (Appendix B). Jamie and Charnelle agreed to be co-facilitators of the group and as such attended

each session and provided leadership and guidance to the researcher-participants and myself. Gary, Jamie and Charnelle all took introductory letters and agreed to distribute them to possible researcher-participants (Appendix C). Although the advisory panel met as a group only once, they were all informed of the ongoing process and were often consulted individually regarding questions and concerns.

Ethics and Consent

This research project successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB) on September 28th, 2010. The research process adhered to the ethical research guidelines developed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) in collaboration with its Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health. Each advisory panel member and researcher-participant signed a Consent and Confidentiality Form and at the outset of each group sharing session, a code of Confidentiality was discussed in order to ensure respect and confidentiality of all participants in the study project. Researcher-participants were also educated on the ethical use of photographs and Photovoice techniques. They agreed not to use photographs of individual people or photographs that could potentially harm or misrepresent them, other people and/or their communities. Researcher-participants names were never used publicly at any time and only I had access to identifying information. In order to maintain anonymity the eight original members chose pseudonyms early on in the process: BuzzGun; Cookie Monster XD; Flying Turtle; East Sunrise; Ali G; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2. These pseudonyms were used for all documentation throughout the research process. Also, all researcher-participants were part of the process of choosing with whom and how they would share their final products.

Participant Recruitment and Selection Process

Criterion sampling involves the recruitment and selection of participants that meet a predetermined criteria. According to Creswell (2007, p.128), "Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon." Therefore, only Aboriginal female adolescent researcher-participants residing in Timmins, Ontario were recruited for this project.

Wade Dumoulin, the Youth Coordinator at the Timmins Friendship Center; Jamie Davey (co-facilitator and advisory panel member) Aboriginal Youth Counselor for District School Board Ontario North East; and Kelly-Anne Marks, guidance counselor at O'Gorman Catholic High School were asked for referrals and input regarding possible researcher-participants. All three of these individuals had intimate knowledge of Aboriginal adolescent girls who could offer a variety of perspectives and who may have been ready and able to emotionally and logistically commit to the project. In early November 2010, The TNFC Youth Coordinator Wade Dumoulin and Jamie Davey distributed an introductory letter to possible participants explaining the Photovoice process (Appendix C). Those Aboriginal adolescent girls who were interested were invited to attend a meeting held at Misiway Milopemahtesewin Community Health Centre in Timmins.

On November 10th, 2010 at 6:30 pm the first recruitment meeting was held. The advisory panel, two researcher-participants and myself were present. The nature of the project was discussed and both girls showed a keen interest. They were aware of others who were also interested however were unable to make it as they had drumming practice. The girls felt that the location and time may have been a deterrent. It was decided that a second recruitment meeting would be held on Wednesday, November 17th at 3:30pm at the Aboriginal Student Lodge at

Timmins High & Vocational School. This location was suggested since many potential researcher-participants attended this school and would not need to arrange for transportation. As well, the Aboriginal Student Lodge is welcoming to all Aboriginal individuals and is the office from which Jamie Davey works. Both girls were given a tentative schedule of the Photovoice project and asked to encourage other Aboriginal girls to attend the next meeting. On November 17th, 2011 at 3:30 pm at the Aboriginal Student Lodge at Timmins High & Vocational School, the second recruitment meeting was held. Charnelle, Jamie and I arrived early to set up the room and set out some food. Four girls attended, two of whom had attended the first meeting. Again, introductions were made and the process of the Photovoice project explained. The girls showed great interest and left with Consent and Confidentiality Forms in order to discuss the project with their parent(s) or guardian(s) (Appendix D). We set the date for the first Photovoice session for Wednesday, December 2nd, at 3:30 pm at the Aboriginal Student Lodge.

I was concerned with the low number of participants at this point because ideally the project should include eight to ten researcher-participants. Therefore, I contacted Kelly-Anne Marks, a guidance counsellor at O'Gorman Catholic High School. I explained the Photovoice project and asked if she felt some of their students might be interested. Kelly-Anne was very helpful and we set up a meeting at O'Gorman Catholic High School for November 22nd, 2010 at 2:00pm. I emailed her a copy of the Letter of Introduction so that she could distribute it to potential recruits. This third recruitment meeting began just after 2:00 pm on November 22nd, 2010. Eight girls were in attendance and we discussed the nature of the Photovoice project. They asked a variety of questions and many were very interested in participating. Each girl was given Consent and Confidentiality Forms and asked to have them signed and returned at the first Photovoice session on Wednesday, December 2nd, 2010 at 3:30 pm at the Aboriginal Student

Lodge at Timmins High & Vocational School. The girls were encouraged to invite others who may have been interested but were unable to attend the meeting. On Wednesday, December 2nd, 2010, 18 potential researcher-participants attended the first Photovoice session. It was quite overwhelming! As a result of the numbers and the fact that there were new recruits, the session took the form of a recruitment meeting. Although repetitive for some, the Photovoice process was again discussed. I strongly emphasized the need for an eight to ten week commitment to the project and distributed the Tentative Schedule (Appendix E).

At this meeting we also discussed the need for confidentiality and the importance of having a safe environment in which to discuss personal issues. The girls were separated into small groups and asked to discuss some of the issues they were facing as Aboriginal adolescent girls. They were asked to respond to "what you should know about us." It appeared that the girls felt comfortable with the topic as many interesting ideas and themes emerged. It was at this point that the girls began to develop a sense of the nature of the project. In further discussing their participation in the research project it was explained that it was absolutely necessary for them to return the Consent and Confidentiality form signed by a parent or guardian. The next session was scheduled for December 9th, 2010 at 3:30 pm at the Aboriginal Student Lodge at Timmins High & Vocational School. I was now concerned with the high number of potential researcher-participants and discussed my concerns with Jamie and Charnelle after the meeting. We felt that although there were many girls, choosing only eight to ten would be very difficult and the possible exclusion of some could potentially have a negative impact on all. It was therefore agreed to see how many girls returned on December 9th with signed consent forms. On December 9th, 2010 eight girls attended the meeting, all submitting a Consent and Confidentiality form, all ready to make a commitment to the research process. The girls were quietly enthusiastic and

excited to receive their binders, journals and cameras. This became the first official session of the Aboriginal Adolescent Girls' Photovoice Research Project. This meeting focused on the purpose of the project and the researcher-participants spent a great deal of time discussing the nature of the research question they would like to explore. They felt that it was important to educate others and help them understand what it meant to be an adolescent Aboriginal girl. Therefore, instead of asking a question, the researcher-participants chose to use the following statement to guide their photo taking and their information sharing: "What you need to know about us".

Participant Characteristics

The eight female participants were between 14 to18 years of age. Among the group were both status (registered with the federal government as Indians, according to the terms of the *Indian Act*) (Statistics Canada, 2008) and non-status Cree individuals who, for most of their early childhood, lived on relatively remote Federal Reserves. Six researcher-participants moved to Timmins specifically to attend high school. Two moved with their families from Peawanuck, Ontario, a Federal Reserve situated near the mouth of the Winisk River that flows into Hudson Bay. Peawanuck is a fly-in community and is surrounded by lands of the Polar Bear Provincial Park. A third moved to Timmins from Attawapiskat, Ontario. This community, at the mouth of the Attawapiskat River flowing into the James Bay, has garnered a great deal of political and media attention as they are involved in an ongoing battle to have a school built in their community. Another two researcher-participants moved from Kashechewan First Nation, a community found on the shores of the Albany River, approximately 300 miles North of Timmins. One of these girls moved to Timmins with her older sister while the other came alone and lived in a boarding situation. A sixth researcher-participant moved to Timmins by herself from Moose Factory, Ontario. This community is an island in the middle of the Moose River flowing into the

southern end of the James Bay. All of these communities are Federal Reserves. The remaining two researcher-participants moved with their entire family from Moosonee, Ontario while still in grade school. Moosonee is not a Federal Reserve but is a predominantly Cree community found on the Moose River, 12 miles south of the James Bay coast. Four researcher-participants were in grade nine, two were in grade eleven, and two were in their graduating year.

Data Collection

In order to maintain rich qualitative data sources over and above the photos and written explanations, a variety of records were kept. Each researcher-participant was given a journal in which to record their personal thoughts, ideas and experiences with regards to the project. This journal was confidential and was not shared with any group member at any time. Although it was not a data source for me or the group it could have been used as a data source for the researcher-participants, especially when developing their written explanations of their photos. I also maintained a similar reflection journal and at the end of every session I documented the details of attendance, time lines and activities that took place. During a few sessions the researcher-participants brainstormed ideas onto large poster paper and a blackboard. The poster paper and the blackboard information was transcribed and kept under lock and key along with the scrapbooks and black foam boards on which pictures were eventually adhered.

Study Timeline

The following chart outlines the timelines and activities beginning in week five as the process of data collection began:

Table 2
Photovoice Data Collection Timelines

Week and Time	Main Topic(s)	Activities
Dec. 9th, 2010: Week 5 Group Sharing Session 3:30 ~ 6:00 pm Present: 8 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; BuzzGun; East Sunrise; Cookie Monster XD; Ali G.; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Charnelle; Kelly	• Introduction of Photovoice: Review and discuss schedule; Develop ground rules for the group with regards to respect and trust; • Review consent & confidentiality forms; • The Photovoice process & ethics: who and what I can photograph; The Mechanics of the Photo Mission • Group Communication: How will we communicate as a group in order to all be aware of meetings?; • Reflection: Life as an Aboriginal adolescent girl; • Establish goals and research question;	• Welcomed with drinks and snacks; • Ice-breaker activity to get to know researcher-participants and co-leaders; • Discussed and demonstrated examples from other Photovoice projects; • Distributed binders with various information handouts and tentative schedule of meetings and photo mission; • Discussed and developed group ground rules for respect, confidentiality and anonymity with the girls each choosing a pseudonym; • Discussed and developed rules for picture taking (review consent forms); • Discussed communication between all group members: all girls have access to the internet and all but one is a member of Facebook therefore the girls agreed that the best way to stay in contact was to establish a Facebook group exclusive to members only; • Developed the group's goal: "***Educating the Community About Who We Are***"(school population, elders, Aboriginal leaders, parents, community of Timmins as a whole); • Distributed cameras for photo mission: **"What You Need to Know About Me";**

		• Discussed at length the type of pictures they could possibly take and how they could represent who they are and what they want others to know about them; • Set next Group Sharing Session (girls wanted to meet one more time before Christmas…Dec. 16th, 2010 @ TH & VS @ 3:30pm
Dec. 16th, 2010: Week 6 Group Sharing Session 3:30 ~ 4:15 pm Present: 1 researcher-participant (Flying Turtle); Jamie; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Review and further discuss group's goal and photo mission theme;	• Only one researcher-participant came to the meeting as many were preparing to travel north to their home communities and/or had assignments to complete before the Christmas break; • No meeting was held and the next meeting scheduled for January 13th, 2011 was posted on Facebook;
Jan. 13th, 2011: Week 10 Group Sharing Session 3:30 ~ 6:00 pm Present: 3 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; BuzzGun; East Sunrise;) Jamie, Kelly; Charnelle;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Distribute photos girls sent for development; • Debriefing of Photo Mission: Sharing photos and storytelling; • Final Product: How do you want to educate and share our stories?	• Using the Group Interview Guide: Photo Analysis Sessions (appendix F), researcher-participants chose photos they wanted to share with the group; • Using the "SHOWED" analysis process (appendix G) the girls shared photos; • Discussed how to create narratives for photos; • The researcher-participants wanted to continue taking photos as they felt that they had more to say; • Briefly discussed the nature of the final product with a few suggestions being proposed such as a Power Point presentation, a slide show or scrapbooks; • Set next meeting for Feb. 3rd, 2011 @ 3:30pm @ TH & VS;

Feb. 3rd, 2011: Week 13 Group Sharing Session 3:30-6:00 pm Present: 8 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; BuzzGun; East Sunrise; Cookie Monster XD; Ali G.; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Charnelle; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Distribute photos girls sent for development; • Debriefing of Photo Mission: Sharing photos and storytelling; • Final Product: How many photographs should be included in the final product? How do you want to educate and share our stories?	• Using the Group Interview Guide: Photo Analysis Sessions (appendix F), researcher-participants chose photos they wanted to share with the group; • Using the "SHOWED" analysis process (appendix G) the girls shared photos; • Discussed the number of photos each researcher-participant should submit; • The researcher-participants decided that a minimum of eight photos should be chosen and they began the process of choosing their photos by using the Reflections Template (Appendix H);
Feb. 10th, 2011: Week 14 Group Sharing Session 3:30 -6:00 pm Present: 5 researcher-participants: (Flying Turtle; Ali G.; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Distribute photos girls sent for development; • Debriefing of Photo Mission: Sharing photos and storytelling; • Discuss emerging themes; • Final Product: How many photographs should be included in the final product? How do you want to educate and share our stories?	• Flying Turtle informed the group that Cookie Monster XD would not be returning to the group as a result of family issues; • Using the Group Interview Guide: Photo Analysis Sessions (appendix F), researcher-participants chose photos they wanted to share with the group; • Using the "SHOWED" analysis process (appendix G) the girls shared photos; • The researcher-participants discussed at length the variety of themes that were beginning to emerge in their photos; A web summarizing the variety of themes was created on the blackboard (Appendix I); • Jamie informed the researcher-participants about the Aboriginal Art and Feast-ival that, as the Aboriginal Youth Counsellor for District School Board ONE, she was organizing; The event was to

		take place on May 5th, 2011 at TH &VS and the entire community would be invited; Jamie suggested to the girls that this might be a great venue at which to share their work; • There was much discussion and all researcher-participants enthusiastically agreed that this venue would be ideal; Again they discussed a possible Power Point/slide show but no final decision regarding the form of the final product was made;
<u>Feb. 24th, 2011: Week 16</u> Group Sharing Session 3:30 -6:00 pm <u>Present:</u> 4 researcher-participants: (Flying Turtle; Ali G.; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 2;) Jamie; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Distribute photos girls sent for development; • Debriefing of Photo Mission: Sharing photos and storytelling; • Final Product: What form will it take?	• Pea 2 informed the group that East Sunrise was experiencing some personal issues with housing and that she may not be returning to the group project; • The girls continued the process of choosing their photos by using the Reflections Template (Appendix H); • Using the Group Interview Guide: Photo Analysis Sessions (appendix F), researcher-participants chose photos they wanted to share with the group; • Using the "SHOWED" analysis process (appendix G) the girls shared photos; • Individually the girls continued to use the Reflections Template (Appendix H) to develop their narratives; • The researcher-participants decided that they would like to create a scrapbook of their photos; This would allow each individual to have an individual final product that they can keep;
<u>March 5th, 2011: Week 17</u> Group Sharing Session	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect;	• Lengthy discussion regarding scrapbooks and how they would

12:00- 4:30 pm Present: 5 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; Ali G.; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Kelly;	• Distribute photos girls sent for development; • Debriefing of Photo Mission: Sharing photos and storytelling; • Final Product: Further discussion regarding the scrapbook; • Writing narratives;	be set up; it was decided by all that their chosen photos would be pasted onto the left page of the book and the corresponding narratives would be written on the right page; • As well, the researcher-participants decided that they would like to choose two photos that best represented what they wanted others "to know about me"; these two 8 X 10 photos would be pasted onto a black foam board and the narrative written around it; • The remainder of the meeting was spent choosing their two primary photos and creating narratives for all their photos;
March 30th, 2011: Week 21 Group Sharing Session 3:30 -6:00 pm Present: 6 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; Ali G.; BuzzGun; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Distribute photos girls sent for development; • Debriefing of Photo Mission: Sharing photos and storytelling; • Choosing final photos and writing narratives;	• Many of the researcher-participants returned from March break with even more photos! • Unfortunately, East Sunrise and Cookie Monster XD will not be returning to the group as a result of personal issues; • The girls discussed their photos and decided that they had more than enough to choose from and that there would be no more submission of photos; • They continued the process of choosing their photos by using the Reflections Template (Appendix H); • Using the Group Interview Guide: Photo Analysis Sessions (appendix F), researcher-participants chose photos they wanted to share with the group; • Using the "SHOWED" analysis process (appendix G) the girls shared photos;

		• Individually the girls continued to use the Reflections Template (Appendix H) to develop their narratives;
<u>April 9th, 2011: Week 22</u> Group Sharing Session 12:00-4:30 pm <u>Present:</u> 6 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; Ali G.; BuzzGun; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Charnelle; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Distribute 8 X 10 primary photos girls sent for development; • Distribute scrapbooks and black foam board; • Distribute invitations to the Aboriginal Art and Feast-ival; • Pasting final photos and writing narratives;	• All researcher-participants worked individually on pasting their photos and writing their narratives; • As a group we discussed the emerging themes of their photos and narratives and created a word web to summarize the various themes; • The girls were given several invitations to the Aboriginal Art and Feast-ival and encouraged to invite family and friends; • All final products must be completed and submitted to Jamie by April 29th, 2011;
<u>April 21st, 2011: Week 24</u> Group Sharing Session 3:30 -6:00 pm <u>Present:</u> 4 researcher-participants (Ali G.; BuzzGun; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Pasting final photos and writing narratives;	• Researcher-participants worked individually on pasting their photos and writing their narratives;
<u>April 28th, 2011: Week 25</u> Group Sharing Session 3:30 -6:00 pm <u>Present:</u> 3 researcher-participants (Ali G.; BuzzGun; Pea 2;) Jamie; Charnelle; Kelly;	• Review established group rules of confidentiality and respect; • Pasting final photos and writing narratives; • Determine schedule for Aboriginal Art Feast-ival;	• Researcher-participants worked individually on pasting their photos and writing their narratives; • As a group we re-visited the themes web that was created on April 9th. Further information was added to many themes but no new themes emerged; • It was determined that all researcher-participants would be at TH &VS by 9am on May 5th to help set up the display for the scrapbooks as well as the mounted foam boards and that they would be present for the

		entire day;
<u>May 5th, 2011: Week 26</u> Aboriginal Feast-ival 9:00 am – 4:00 pm <u>Present:</u> 6 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; Ali G.; BuzzGun; Fluffy Unicorn; Pea 1; Pea 2;) Jamie; Charnelle; Kelly;	• Set up venue and create display of final products;	• All researcher-participants helped with the set up of the venue and the display of the scrapbooks and foam boards (Appendix J for photo of display); • Many parents and friends attended the event and the girls were proud to share their work with all;
<u>June 23rd, 2011: Week 33</u> TNFC AGM 4:30-7:00 pm <u>Present</u>: 2 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; Pea 2) Jamie; Kelly;	• Create display of final products; • Brief presentation regarding the nature of the Aboriginal Adolescent Girls' Photovoice project;	• Because of exams only two members could attend the AGM; • Flying Turtle briefly discussed her involvement in the project and encouraged all in attendance to view both the foam boards and the scrapbooks; • Kelly also made a brief presentation regarding her role in the project;
<u>June 27th, 2011: Week 34</u> Wrap Up Session 6:30-9:30 pm <u>Present</u>: 4 researcher-participants (Flying Turtle; Ali G.; BuzzGun; Fluffy Unicorn;)	• Final meeting and closing banquet;	• 2 of the researcher-participants were not available to attend as they had already returned to their home communities; • A meal was shared and the researcher-participants were reminded that their scrapbooks and foam boards would be returned to them once the analysis was completed; • Researcher-participants, Jamie and Charnelle were thanked for their participation and commitment to the project;

It is obvious from the table above that although an eight to ten week commitment was asked of the researcher-participants, the actual process from start to finish took well over 30

weeks, including the recruitment meetings. A variety of reasons accounted for this including Christmas holidays, the traditional goose hunt, March break, the Easter break and the ongoing demands of the participants' academic schedules and exams. Because the researcher-participants were originally from the James Bay coast most traveled north for each of these events thus creating long breaks between sessions due to the inability to meet. Nonetheless, a total of 13 sessions took place over a 29-week period; the researcher-participants truly guided this process as they determined the time, place and date of the sessions and the form of the final products.

Traditionally, Photovoice is meant to include only one photo taking block or photo mission however, it quickly became evident that the researcher-participants wanted to change this tradition. All were well versed in technology including being familiar with a variety of applications and programs that could enhance and alter photos and all had a large personal collection of digital photos. A number of the participants chose to use a combination of their old and new photographs. Researcher-participants also chose to have an ongoing photo mission because they were traveling north to their home Reserves, to their traditional hunting grounds or south to bigger cities and felt that taking pictures in these settings would be equally as representative of their lived experiences.

As mentioned above, the researcher-participants were well versed technologically thus a Facebook page was created to manage meeting logistics. In keeping with current photo technology researcher-participants emailed their photos to me whereupon I saved their photos onto a CD and printed them at the local drug store. The researcher-participants were prolific in the production of photographs. Digital technology allowed them to take many pictures and

although they 'screened' them for printing they nevertheless chose a great many pictures upon which to reflect. This further extended the timeline of the study as we had many sessions that dealt with choosing the photos and meanings they felt best represented who they are.

On February 24th, 2010, the researcher-participants, after a lengthy discussion decided that their end product would take the form of a scrapbook in which their photographs would be mounted and a written explanation would be created on the opposing page. During the following meeting on March 5th, 2010, the researcher-participants decided that choosing two primary photographs and mounting them on black foam board would further capture an audiences' attention. Consequently, the end products took two forms; two 8 X 10 photos and an individual scrapbook for each researcher-participant.

Selection of Photos

Choosing the photographs to be included in their end product was not an easy task. As mentioned previously, the researcher-participants had a collection of photos, many of which were taken prior to the forming of the Photovoice group and chose to include both old and new photos. As well, the girls decided that taking photos should be an on-going process and not limited to just one week; they would be traveling to their home communities and definitely wanted to include that aspect of their lived experiences. Consequently, many group sessions involved reviewing and choosing photos. Most researcher-participants had between 50 and 75 photos from which to choose.

As dictated by the PAR method, the researcher-participants were responsible for choosing the photos they wished to share. The process of photo selection began on January 13th, 2011.

Choosing from their many possibilities each photograph was discussed using the following "SHOWED" guideline (Wang and Burris, 1994):

> What do you **S**ee here?
> What's really **H**appening here?
> How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
> **W**hy does this problem/condition/situation/strength exist?
> Who could the image **E**ducate/the community/policy makers/etc.?
> What can we **D**o about it?

Using the "SHOWED" guidelines allowed the researcher-participants to share their photos in a structured and respectful manner with the entire group. The process dictated that the person presenting the photo was the first to comment and interpret their photo. Subsequent discussions about each photo took a less structured format and lead to a more in-depth analytic process as the other researcher-participants questioned and provided personal input. Reflexivity within the process allowed the photographer and the group to reflect on the interpretation of the photographic message and intent. Based on these discussions and reflections each researcher-participant chose which photos they felt best represented who they are and their lived experiences. The process of selecting photographs was ongoing and continued up until April 29, 2011, when all final products were to be submitted. Each researcher-participant included two primary photos and between 10 and 30 photographs in their individual scrapbooks.

Contextualization

The second stage of contextualizing began with the researcher-participants selecting specific photos they wanted to be part of the final products. As mentioned previously, it was agreed by the group that each researcher-participant would select a minimum of eight photographs for their final products; two primary photographs to be mounted on foam board and at least six to be included in their scrapbooks. Through various discussions it became apparent to

the researcher-participants that the photos alone could not appropriately and completely inform others of their lived experiences. They realized that their photographs taken out of context could be interpreted in a variety of ways and therefore they needed to add their individual voices through the use of the written word. Following the "SHOWED" guideline helped the researcher-participants add context to their photos. To further the contextualization process they were given a Reflections Template (Appendix H) that enabled them to focus on each photo individually, describe the photo in their own words, explain what the photo said to them and suggest the meanings that they wanted viewers to take from the photo. Many group sessions involved discussions and clarifications as to what exactly their photos meant to them. Adding text proved to be difficult for some but with the help of all group members they were able to clearly articulate their interpretations of their photos (see Appendix I for transcribed contextualized data). Again, the process of contextualizing was ongoing and continued up until all final products were submitted.

Although the data collection process far surpassed the anticipated timelines and did not strictly adhere to the Photovoice method, the researcher-participants lead the process and enthusiastically shared their personal stories through group discussions and photographs. As the following chapter will illustrate, the photos varied widely; from a winter landscape in the far north to the statue of liberty in New York city. Not only were the photos beautiful and varied, their accompanying written explanations were very powerful.

Chapter 3 - Data Analysis

In this chapter I will discuss the unique processes of data analysis in Photovoice. The process of coding the photos by the researcher-participants will be presented along with methods verification. Finally, nine categories and one primary theme will be discussed. As illustrative of the data collection and analysis, a selection of photographs will also be presented to illustrate the discussion/analysis.

As a result of the unique nature of Photovoice research, primary data analysis is embedded in the data collection process as those who are 'researched' must be involved in all stages of research to ensure respect and empowerment of all. To this end, the researcher-participants first selected photographs that they felt most accurately reflected their lived experiences. The second stage involved contextualizing the photos by adding written explanations and stories about what the photographs meant to them. Finally, through group discussions the researcher-participants identified a variety of themes that emerged from the data they brought to the table (Wang & Burris, 1997), and then assigned them conceptual labels (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). These concepts were then grouped to form categories that "are higher in level and more abstract than the concepts they represent" (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p.7).

Conceptual Labeling by Researcher-Participants

Data analysis of a Photovoice project is embedded in the process and on February 10th, 2011, the researcher-participants presented and discussed their photos. Instead of working on their accompanying written descriptions, we discussed some of the themes that were beginning to emerge. Through a lengthy group brainstorm and discussion, guided by the co-facilitator and myself and using a blackboard and a variety of coloured chalk, the researcher-participants generated a word web of themes and assigned conceptual labels such as loss, self-esteem and

culture (Appendix I). During this process the researcher-participants were able to draw ideas and concepts from their many photographs and their personal journals. At times the discussion was light-hearted and humourous, and at others, more deeply personal. It was very clear that the researcher-participants felt comfortable and trusted that sharing so much of their thoughts and ideas and their lived experiences would be fully respected.

The web was transcribed to poster paper and displayed at every subsequent meeting so that the researcher-participants could not only refer to it when creating their written descriptions of each photograph but also add to it or adjust it to reflect their ongoing experiences. The process of having the researcher-participants label the emerging categories "avoids the distortion of fitting data into a predetermined paradigm: it enables us to hear and understand how people make meaning themselves or construct what matters to them" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 382). In the end, after extended discussions and reflections, what mattered to the six Aboriginal adolescent researcher-participants involved in this study coalesced into nine categories: self-esteem, city life, the Rez, culture, differences, loss, outdoors, identity, and family. Table 3 summarizes their conceptual labeling.

Table 3

Nine Categories

Categories	**Related Issues**
Self-esteem	• Body image • Healthy lifestyles • Stereotypes (lazy, drunks, worthless, uneducated/unemployed) • Suicide • Perseverance (we all make mistakes; need to find our own path)
City life	• Can be safer than the Rez • Very different/culture shock • Difficult to figure it all out • Feeling out of place

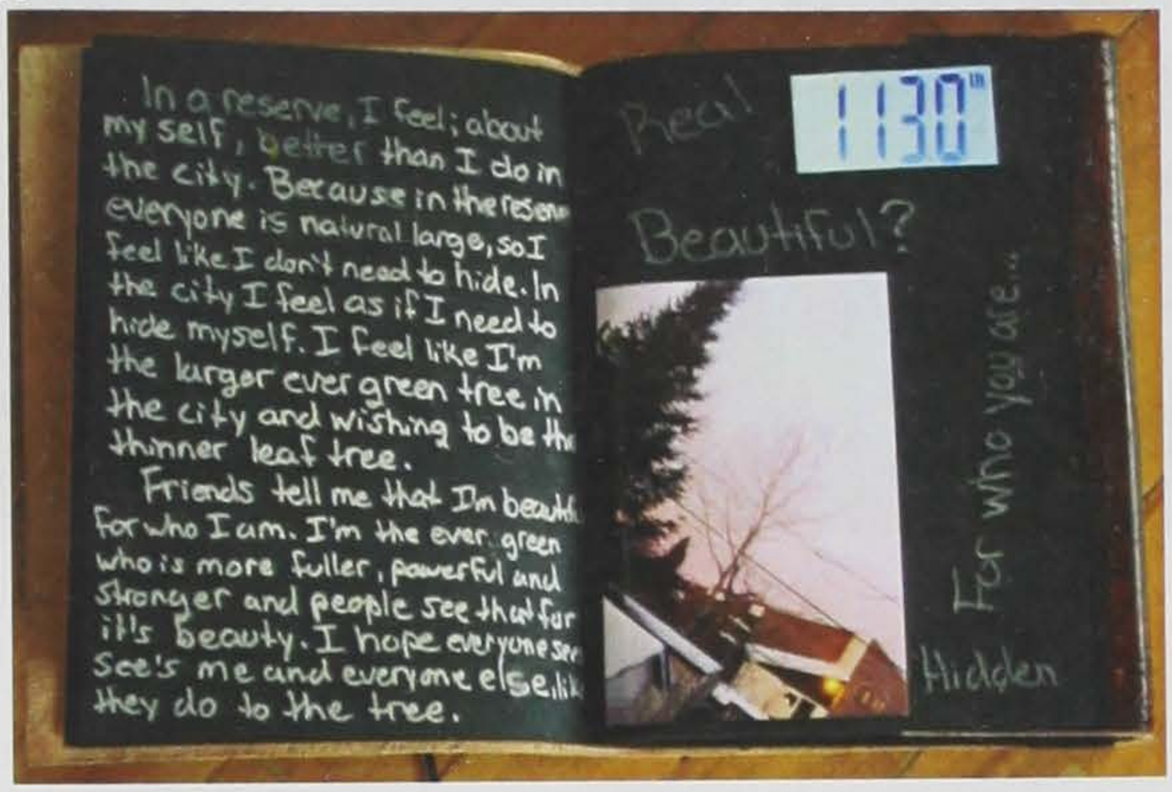
The Rez	• Judgmental • hard choices • "crabs in the bucket" • Peer pressure • Positive and negative expectations (drinking, sex, drugs, smoking, pregnancy) • Lack of opportunities • Isolation creates the need to move away
Culture	• Hunting, fishing, food, • Drum, smudging, Pow wow • Curiosity & confusion • Witchcraft & Devil Worship?? vs religion • Brings strength and peace
Differences	• Invisible vs Discrimination • School • Lack of acceptance & lack of respect • Not as valuable • being unique should be valued
Loss	• Suicide • Residential school • Culture & traditional ways • Home & friends
Outdoors	• Home, comfort & safety • Peaceful • Freedom • Family
Identity	• Not JUST Aboriginal • Complex • Funny • Unique
Family	• Often broken but fixable • Acceptance (both ways) • Love and respect • Forgiveness of self and others (we all make mistakes)

I chose two photographs and their corresponding written descriptions to demonstrate the results of coding completed by the researcher-participants.

Self-esteem:

Photo 1

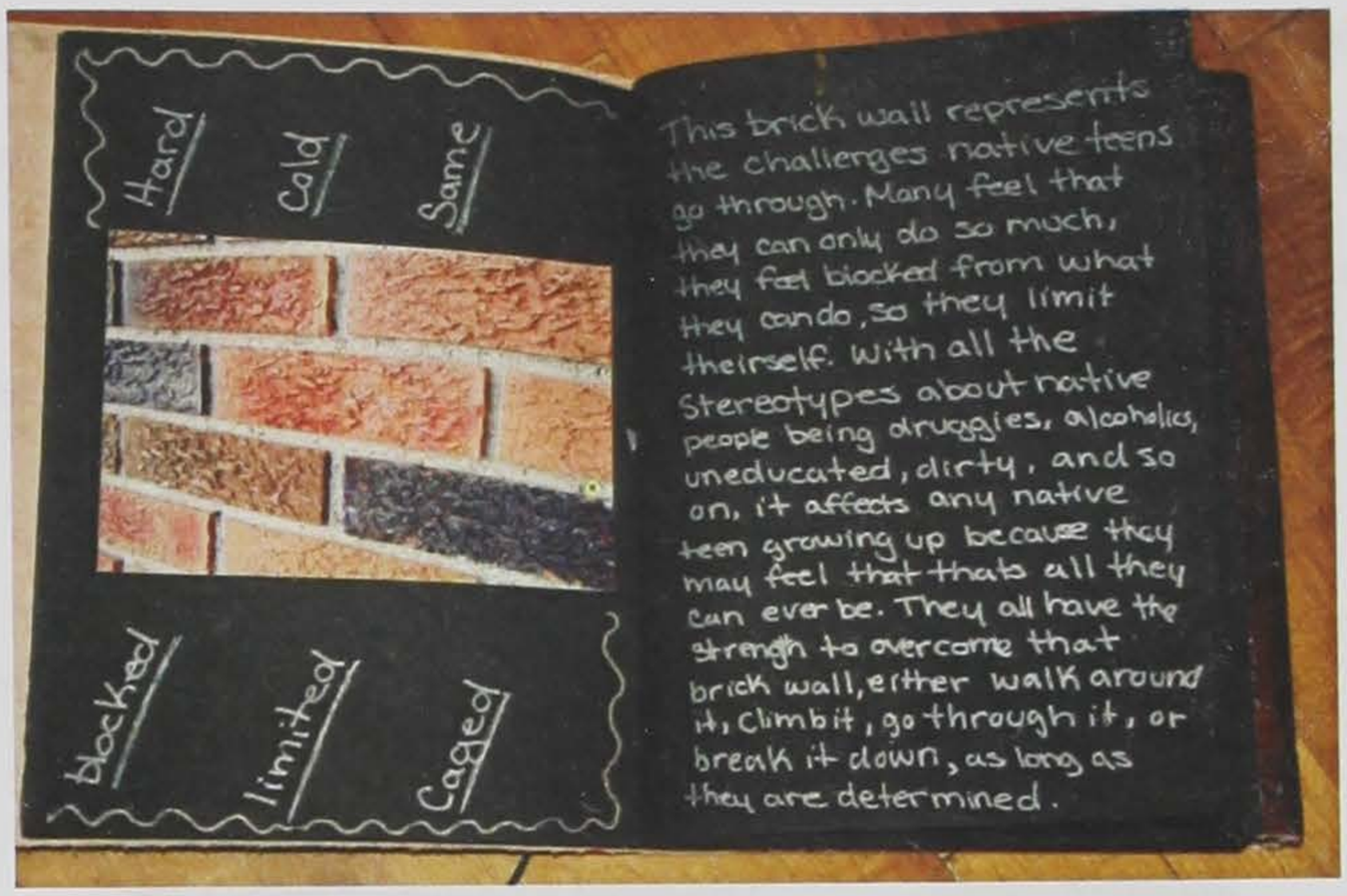
1. Flying Turtle



In this picture Flying Turtle referred to her body image. She stated that she feels more comfortable in her body on the reserve because everyone there is naturally large and therefore, she doesn't feel the need to hide. She did however feel like she needed to hide in the city as she felt like the larger tree in the photograph. Her friends helped her to see herself as the larger tree but in a positive light: fuller, more powerful, stronger and beautiful.

Photo 2

2. Pea 1:



Pea 1's photographs and written explanations inform an understanding of her perceptions of the world. In particular she used a brick wall to represent the many challenges Native teens face, including "the stereotypes about Native people being druggies, alcoholics, uneducated, dirty and so on". She understood that these stereotypes affect all Native teens because they may feel that this is "all they can ever be" and are blocked from believing in themselves and setting achievable goals. It is clear that Pea 1 was aware and has experienced the impact of these stereotypes however she believes that through determination they can be overcome. For instance, she discussed how she understood the importance of setting goals, working towards them, and making sacrifices to reach them. Her optimism was also clearly evident throughout her journal as she appreciated both her home community for the comforts and beauty it offers and also appreciated city life for the many educational and technological opportunities it has to offer.

Throughout the group process Pea 1 made it clear that her main priority was school and at times she missed group sessions because she had important tests or assignments. It was clear to her that there were many paths to success and that each individual has to find their own and find

the strengths to navigate through their personal challenges. This belief clearly worked for Pea l as she graduated from high school with honors in June 2011 and received several scholarships and bursaries. She is in a pre-health sciences program at Northern College and continues to be an active member of her traditional drumming group.

Loss:

Photo 3

Buzz Gun:

Buzz Gun recently become aware of the injustices experienced by Aboriginal people and how they have impacted her personally. In the fall of 2010, Buzz Gun was a youth participant in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission meetings that is a federal government initiative. The Commission has a five-year mandate to document the history of residential schools, inspire reconciliation and produce a report by 2014 for survivors of residential schools. Her participation in the meetings had a profound impact on her as she felt that she better understood Aboriginal people and the challenges they face. Buzz Gun also said that the experience had deepened her relationship with her father. In discussing this photograph she told the group that she and her father considered how to best capture his experience in residential school. They experimented with several photographic ideas and felt that the image of an eagle feather behind a barbed wire

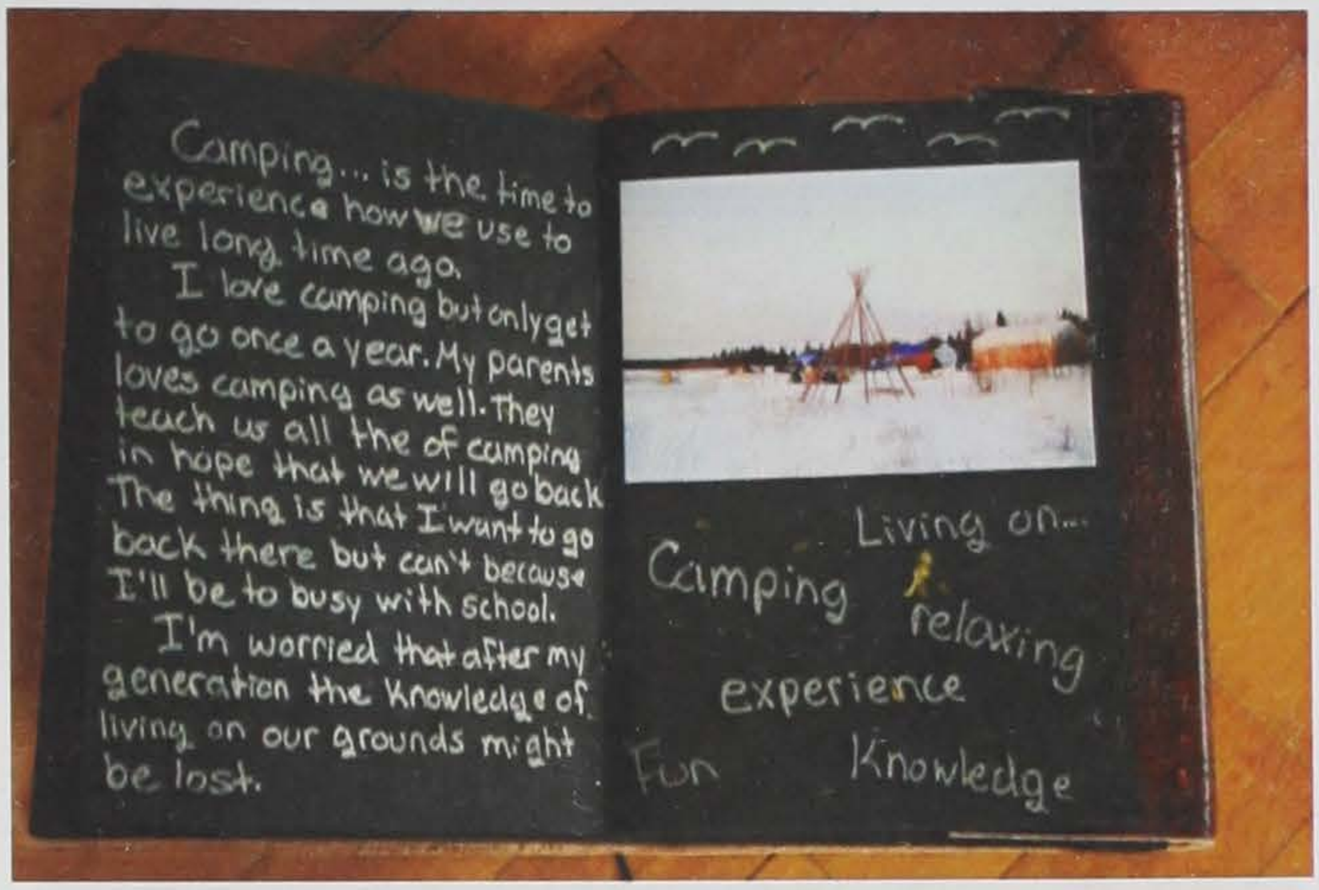
fence best illustrated his feelings of being trapped and hurt and still desperately trying to hold on to his culture. Buzz Gun also stated that she is coming to realize the importance of her Aboriginal culture and the role it can play in her life. She noted that she is angry that she doesn't know her traditional ways and wonders what it would be like today if residential schools had never existed. She writes: "The eagle feather: I know it's important to our people. But I have no clue what it is, how important it is or what it stands for."

Buzz Gun has also experienced a great deal of loss as a result of suicide. In several group sessions Buzz Gun discussed the high rates of suicide among her friends, family and community members and expressed her belief that among Aboriginal adolescents: "I feel there are so many suicides because of Residential school". She also believes that individuals in her home community of Moose Factory are lacking resources and have "no one to reach out to."

Despite these painful experiences, Buzz Gun also views the world as "open" and ready for her to explore. She has been to New York City and feels that "there's so much out in the world and I can accomplish anything and be someone and travel…" Buzz Gun's journal includes many complementary photographs including high heel shoes contrasted with moccasins and hunting on the James Bay coast versus the Statue of Liberty. She expresses delight in being able to "liv[e] in both worlds". She seems to be safely 'nested'- enjoying participation in traditional Cree activities like camping and hunting as well as visiting New York City.

Photo 4

2. Flying Turtle:



Flying Turtle discussed the loss she feels as a result of having to leave her community. She loves camping but can only do it once per year. She worried that the next generation will not know how to live on their native land as she will not be able to pass it on.

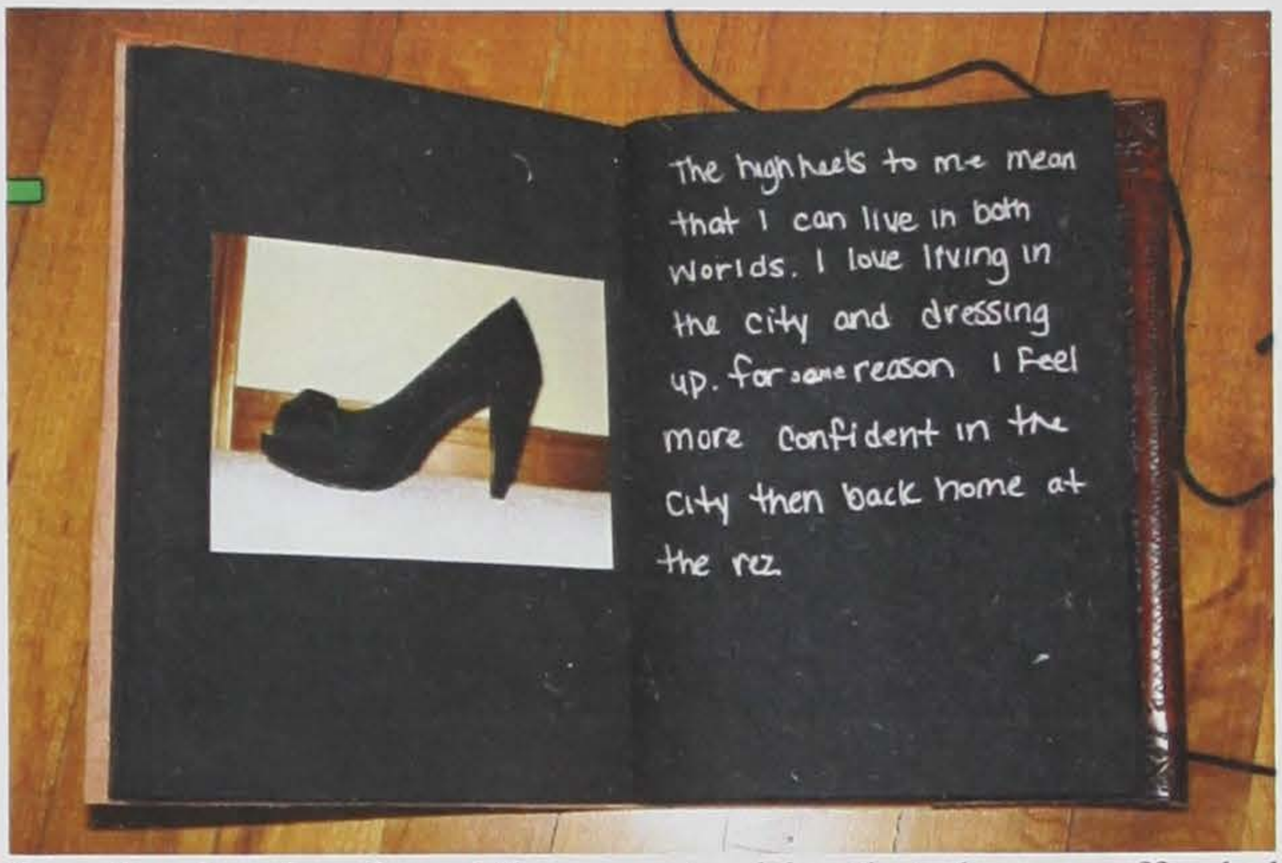
City Life:

Photo 5
1. Pea 2:

Pea 2 felt out of place and alone in the city. She obviously felt misunderstood in a larger, urban community, which is symbolized by the photograph of this solitary butterfly held captive at the F. Jean MacLeod Butterfly Gallery at Science North.

Photo 6

1. Buzz Gun:



Buzz Gun on the other hand, enjoyed the opportunities that she was afforded in the city. She could dress up and feel confident in the city. Throughout Buzz Gun's scrapbook she refers to her pride in being able to live in both worlds with relative ease.

<u>Differences:</u>

Photo 7

1. Flying Turtle:

Despite feeling different, Flying Turtle believed she was beautiful. She referred to differences in appearance and feeling somewhat odd because she is Aboriginal. Despite having to

experience some negativity, Flying Turtle clearly had the ability to see the positive aspect of her differences and diversity.

Photo 8

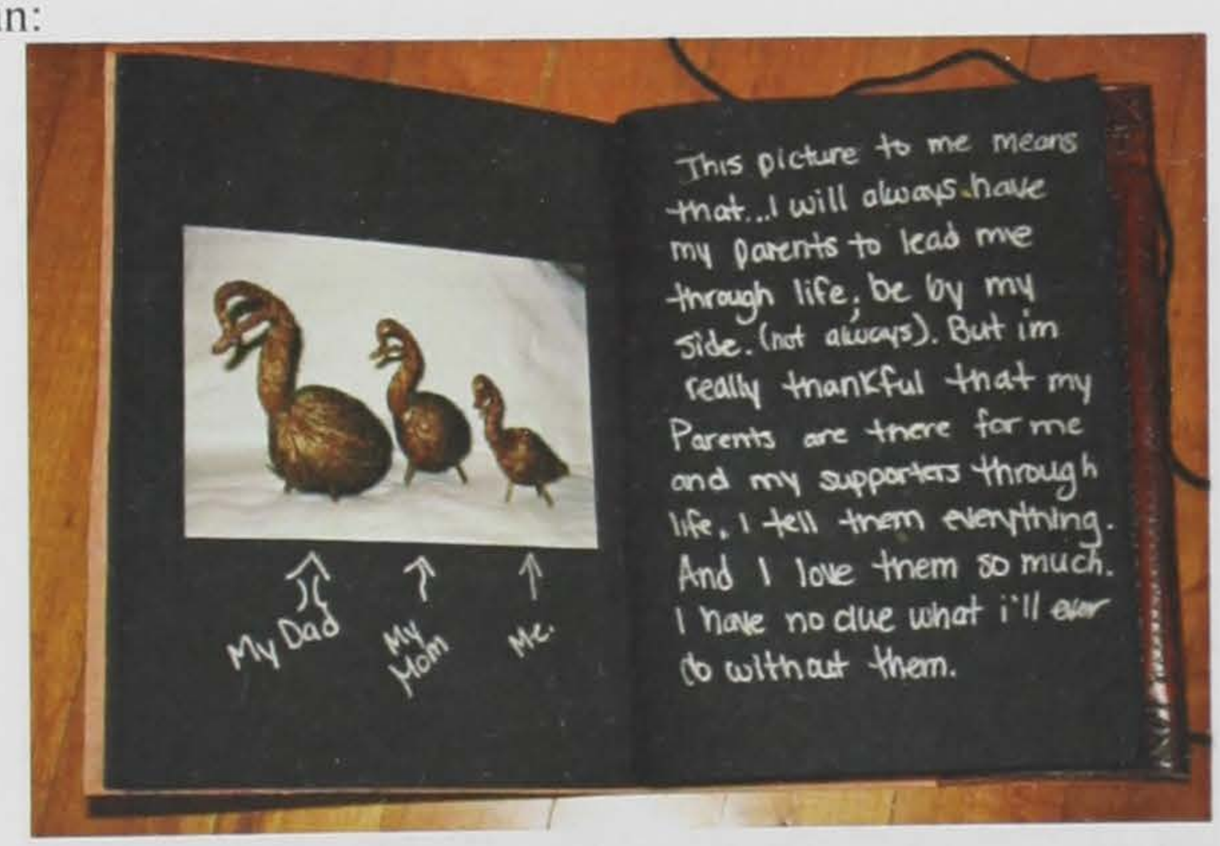
2. Ali G:

Ali G. understood that many people want to be the same as others and fit into an acceptable mold. She accepted that humans are all the same but that it's also important for individuals to stand out, be themselves and embrace their differences.

Family:

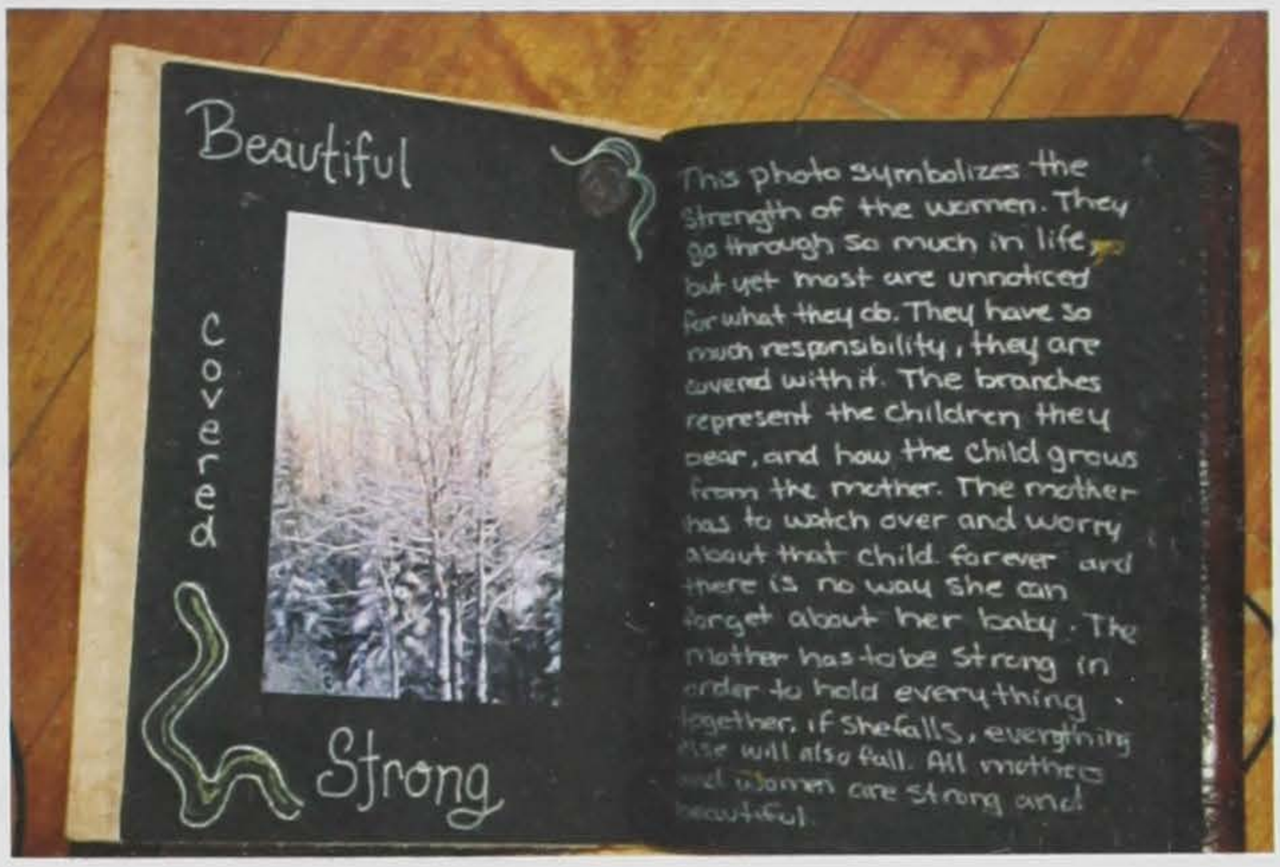
Photo 9

1. Buzz Gun:



Buzz Gun was very much aware of the support and guidance she received from her parents. She was thankful and clearly loves, respects and appreciates them.

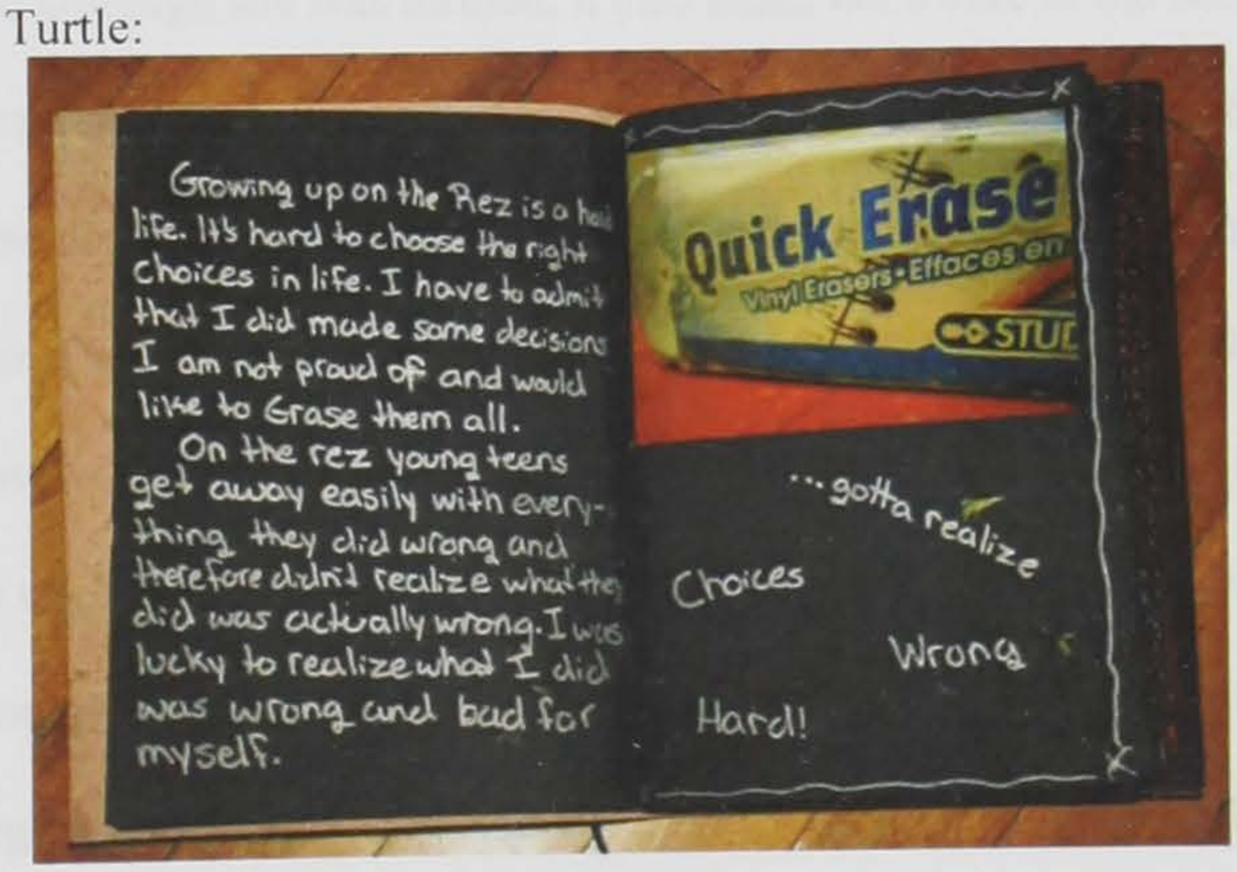
Photo 10
2. Pea 1:



Pea 1 recognized the strength of the women in her life. She believed women to be strong, beautiful and nurturing. She believed that the mother "hold[s] everything together, if she falls, everything else will also fall." Pea 1 recognized and beautifully illustrated the vital role mothers play in the lives of all.

The Rez:

Photo 11
1. Flying Turtle:



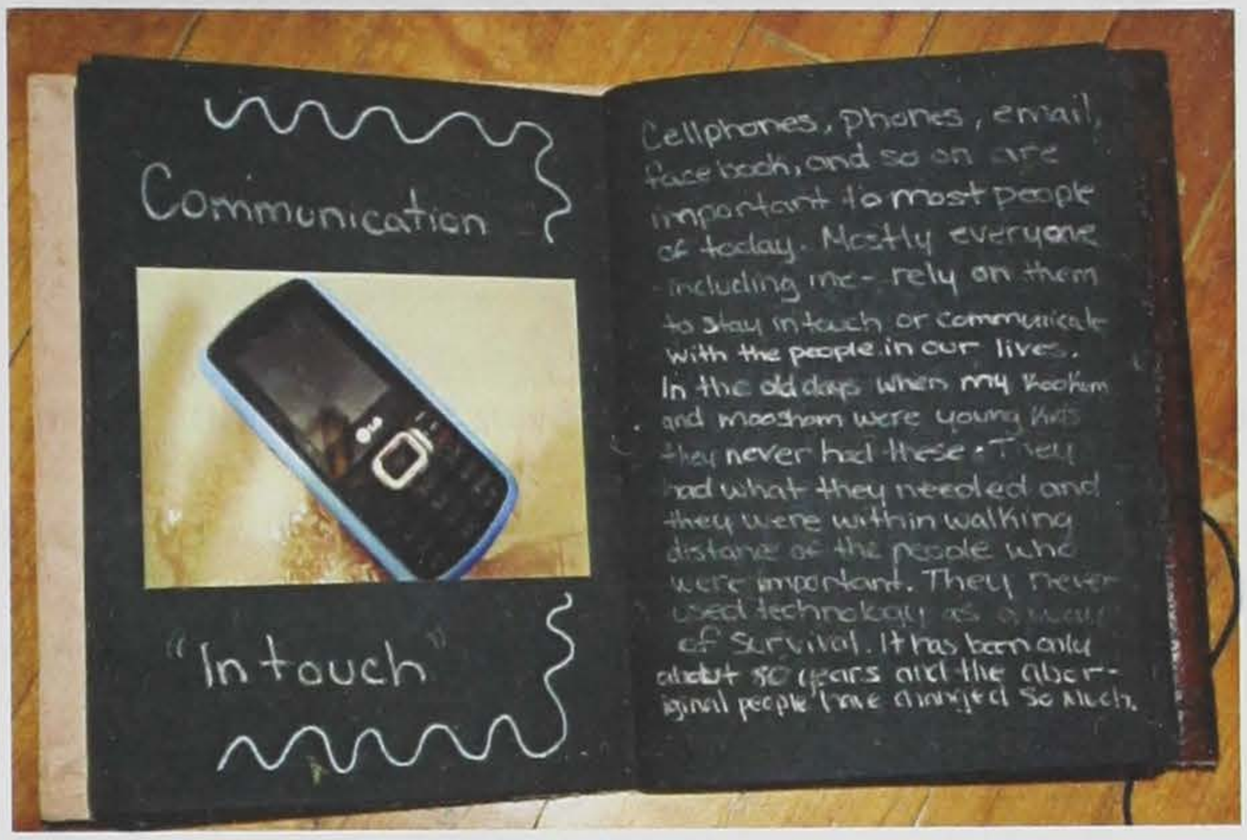
Flying Turtle said that growing up on the reserve was difficult. She stated that it was hard to make good decisions and that young people living on the reservation were not always held accountable for their actions. This made it difficult for youth to even understand right from wrong. Flying Turtle felt fortunate to have been able to recognize that some of her decisions were wrong and had a negative effect on her.

Through her photograph of a hockey trophy, Flying Turtle conveys her understanding that life for Aboriginal people living on Reserve can be full of injustices. She explained that although she loved playing hockey she was disappointed when they participated in tournaments beyond her community of reserves because she realized that her team was not as good as the others and felt that it was because they didn't have the resources (coaching and equipment) needed to be competitive with bigger, more Southern community teams. In another photograph Flying Turtle shows that she loves her home community but that she will probably never live there again, simply because the opportunities for employment are so limited.

At one point during the study, Flying Turtle was very excited about traveling North to the James Bay coast to go camping with her family. She stated that this would only happen once during the year and although she was thrilled, it also made her aware of the sacrifices she has to make simply because she chose to pursue her education 'off-reserve'. Although Flying Turtle acknowledged these negative aspects of her lived experiences she also recognized the opportunities in her life. "Every morning I look out my window and see something way different than I do back home on the reserve. I see opportunities I get living in the city...I could see better education and less negative activities. I could see my future, having a great job." Flying Turtle wished that these opportunities were available to everyone, however she accepted that "it's a bit hard to do so living on the reserve." Throughout Flying Turtle's journal she demonstrated her

awareness that making personal life choices means having to make sacrifices but that these choices also bring opportunities.

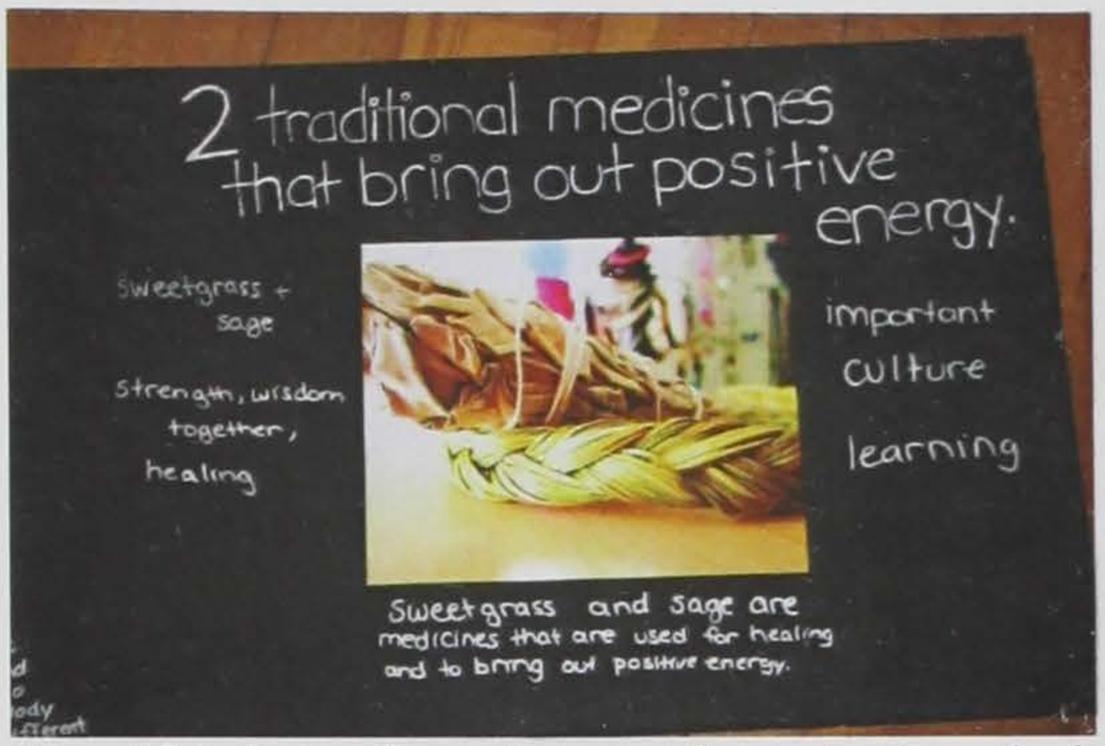
Photo 12
2. Pea 1:



Through this photo of a cell phone, Pea 1 illustrated how life on the reservation has changed. "They had what they needed and they were within walking distance of the people who were important". Pea 1 also showed how, despite having to be away from her community and her loved ones, she could still stay in touch or communicate with the people in her life, thus maintaining important relationships

<u>Culture:</u>

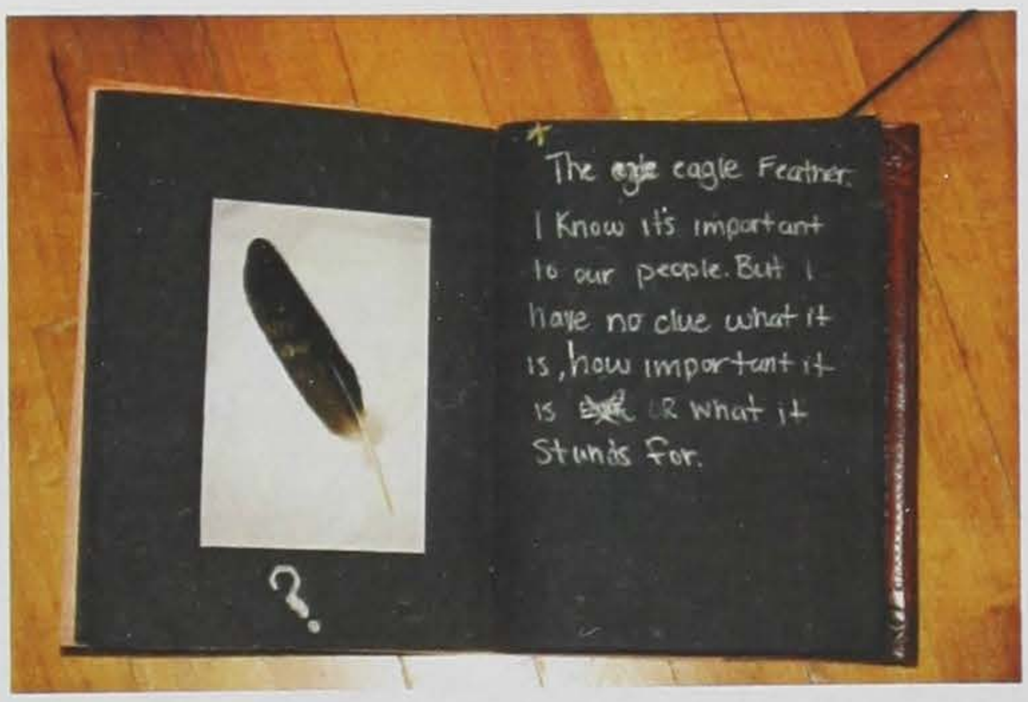
Photo 13
1. Pea 2:



Pea 2 used this beautiful photo of sweetgrass and sage to share the importance of culture. She believed that these two traditional medicines bring positive energy and healing. It is clear that Pea 2 saw these two medicines as important to her cultural identity.

Photo 14

2. Buzz Gun:

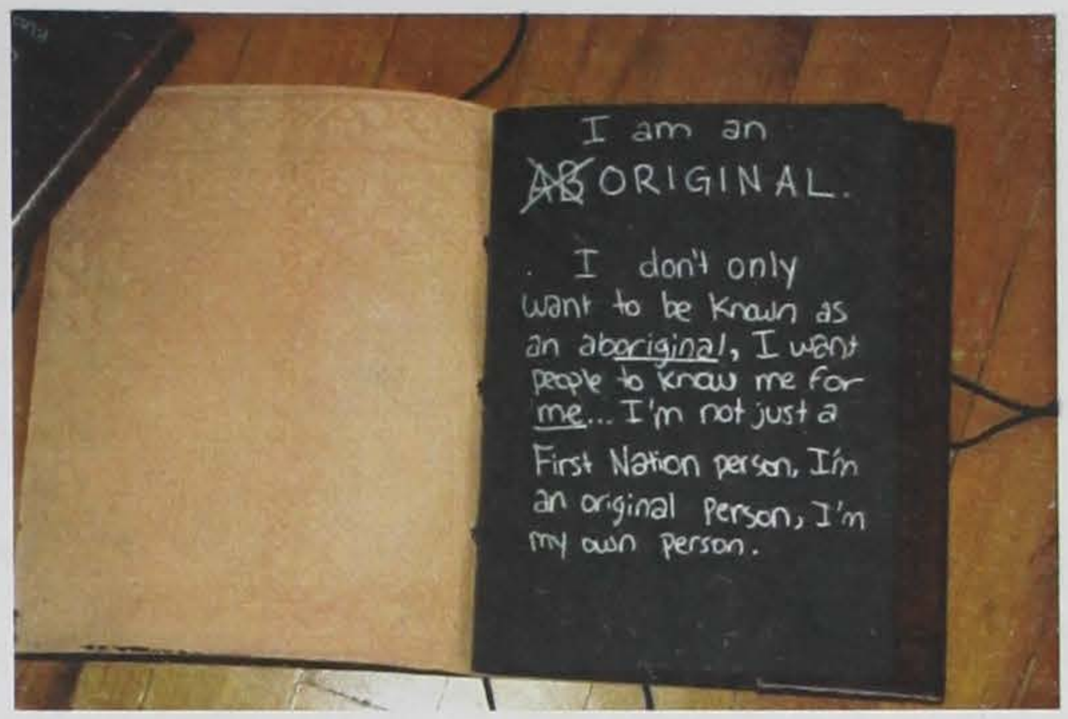


Buzz Gun was very much aware that the eagle feather has important significance to her Aboriginal culture. However, due to past losses she was not aware of its meaning or the nature of its importance. Throughout her scrapbook she referred to her resentment of not having full knowledge of her Aboriginal culture and traditions.

Identity:

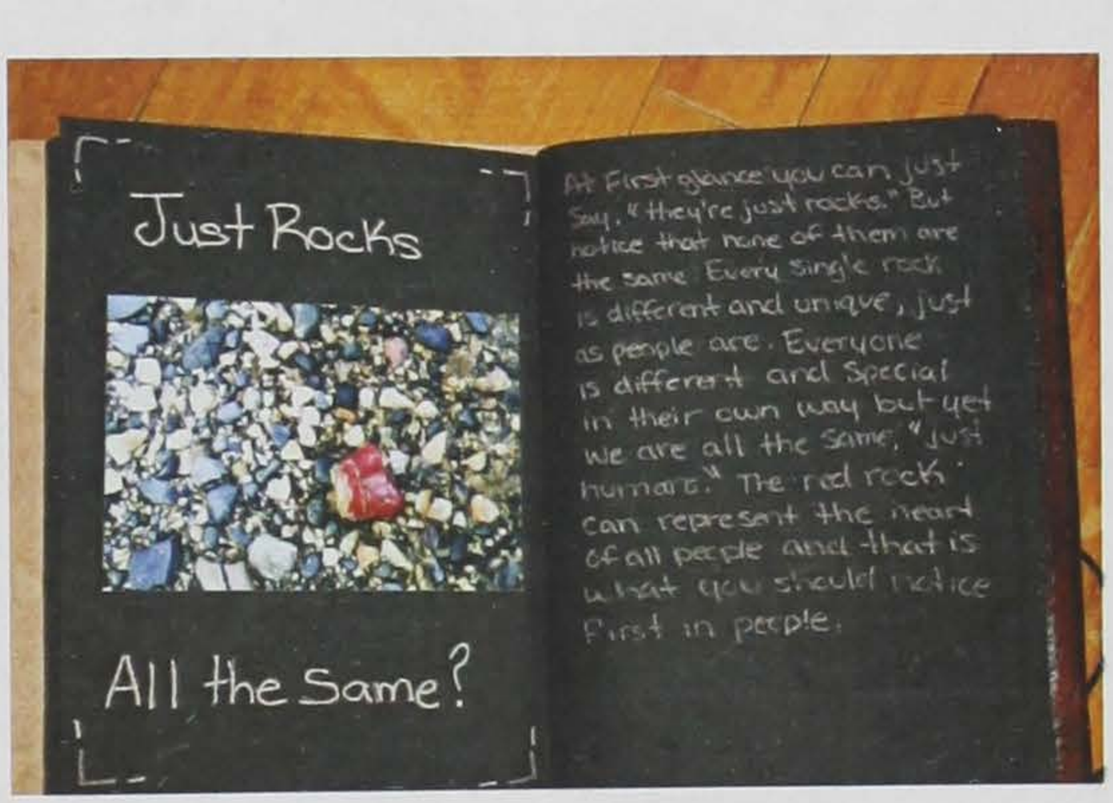
Photo 15

1. Ali G:



This is Ali G's introductory page of her journal. She wanted her audience to realize that she is a unique and original individual. She did not reject her Aboriginal heritage but simply wanted to be recognized for everything she is…not just her Aboriginal heritage.

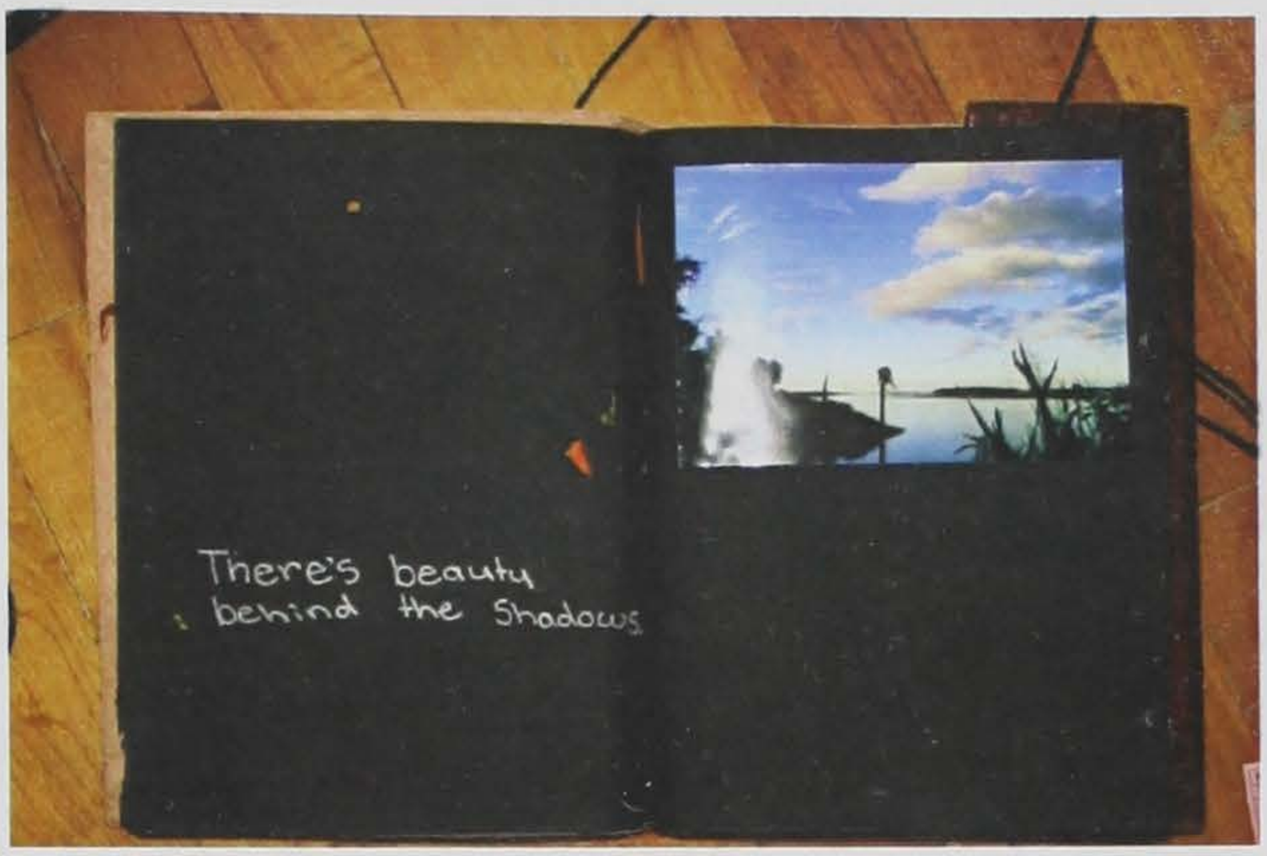
Photo 16
2. Pea 1:



Pea 1 recognized that humans have many commonalities but that they also have many differences. Each is different and special in their own way and that each should be accepted for that uniqueness.

<u>Outdoors:</u>

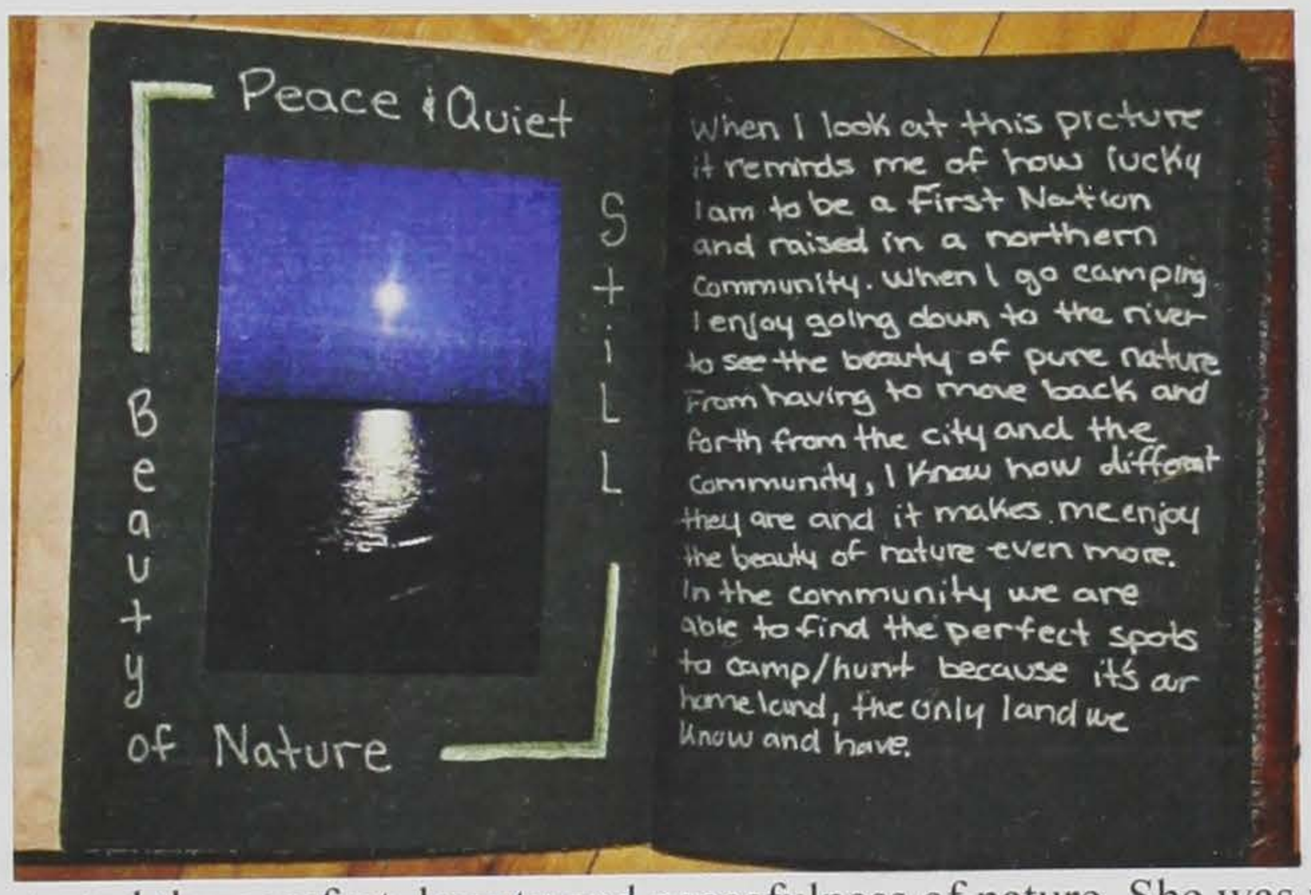
Photo 17
1. Fluffy Unicorn:



Fluffy Unicorn recognized and appreciated the beauty and complexity of nature.

Photo18

2. Pea 1:



Pea 1 illustrated the comfort, beauty and peacefulness of nature. She was very appreciative of the relatively undisturbed nature found in her community and the "luck" of being a First Nations individual.

Through these amazing photographs and written descriptions, the researcher-participants revealed the attributes of resilient profiles. Indeed, upon further reflection and analysis, the nine

categories were related into one main theme that can further tell the story of the data analysis: resiliency. In the following chapter, the main theme of resilience is explored and discussed.

Methods Verification

In Photovoice, because the participants are involved in the data analysis, the analysis and findings reflect their experiences and ideas. First, all participants in this research study, including the advisory panel, myself and the researcher-participants spent a prolonged time working to create a quality educational end product. Having worked with Aboriginal youth for over 20 years and being the co-leader of this Photovoice project, I have developed a thorough understanding of the girls' lived experiences and can convey an accurate corresponding narrative.

A second strategy used throughout the research process was member checking. In discussing individual photographs, in determining themes and in developing narratives, each researcher-participant was asked to provide feedback in order to ensure that everyone in the group fully understood the intended messages. As mentioned in the Photovoice Data Collection Table, on February 10, 2011, the researcher-participants developed a themes web. On several occasions the themes web was discussed, and as a group and as individuals, researcher-participants were able to add or remove information. Many group and one-on-one discussions occurred at all stages of the research project. They were able to provide further clarification and make changes where necessary.

Finally, to further enhance the accuracy of the study the advisory panel was consulted and asked to review the categories and main theme. As peers, they were able to offer valuable input and ensure that the results would speak to other community members and agencies. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation, member checking and peer debriefing have established results that can be considered believable and trustworthy (Creswell, 2009).

Limitation of the Study

A limitation of the study was related to the size of the Aboriginal sample. At the beginning of the process there were as many as 18 Aboriginal adolescent girls who showed interest in the project. As a result of personal and academic circumstances the group began with eight researcher-participants and eventually ended up with six as two left the group at different points through the process as a result of circumstances beyond their control. One girl left because her boarding home parent passed away suddenly. As a result, she needed to find new lodging and coped with doing so on her own. The second girl left not because she wanted to but instead because her parents felt that the group was a distraction and that she needed to put more effort into her schoolwork.

The Aboriginal adolescent girls who were involved with the project, and stayed involved with it, had successfully established resilient trajectories. They were all attending school regularly and being successful academically; none were teen mothers, none were heavily involved in drug and alcohol abuse, and none had ever been in trouble with the law. Although some girls who may not have established resilient trajectories showed interest in the beginning, it became obvious that they were unfortunately unable to make a 10-week commitment to the project. It would have been very interesting to be able to collect data from those individuals who may be struggling to surmount the adversity and vulnerability factors in their lives and have not yet established resilient adaptations. Future research could consider how to include these perspectives.

Chapter 4: Resilience

The photographs, written descriptions, comments and journal entries discussed in the previous chapter, revealed a group of young Aboriginal women who are accepting of others, self-aware, realistic and optimistic. All six of the researcher-participants indicated a keen awareness of the challenges and adversities they are facing now and will be as they begin to enter young adulthood. They were also cognizant of the support systems in their lives that have helped guide them through these challenges and adversities. In other words, they have established 'resilient life trajectories' and so it is worthwhile to further consider their resilience.

As mentioned in the review of literature, compared with other groups in Canadian society Aboriginal youth generally have a more difficult time building resilient life trajectories and often experience increased rates of suicide (Caldwell, 2008; MacNeil, 2008), substance use and abuse (Saewye, E., et.al., 2006), early pregnancy (Shercliffe, Hampton, McKay-McNabb, Jeffery, Beattie & McWatters, 2007; Banister & Begoray, 2006), and higher drop-out rates (van der Woerd & Cox, 2003; Brady, 1996; Knesting, 2008; Bazylak, 2002). These challenges were discussed by the researcher-participants including the losses caused by the Residential school system, suicide, stereotypical attitudes, and peer pressure to drink and take drugs.

Resiliency was once thought to be a character trait, something that was mostly innate. More recently researchers have rejected this notion and instead have proposed it to be a set of learned behaviours and community supports that lead to positive adaptations despite being challenged by multiple vulnerability and adversity factors. Therefore, resiliency can vary significantly across different cultures, communities and individuals (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Unger et al., 2008). As a result of this shift in paradigm, resiliency no longer fits into a standardized definition or measurement (Unger et al., 2008). The analysis generated by this

Photovoice project can help us understand indicators of resilience for Aboriginal adolescent girls. The identification of indicators of resilient trajectories may help to inform those who work with Aboriginal youth at risk and provide focus for future research.

As was discussed in the Introduction, Aboriginal young people are a vulnerable population. Vulnerability factors as discussed previously, are aspects of one's life and personality that can exacerbate negative life circumstances and lead to adjustment difficulties. These can include: gender, age, intelligence and many more (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Saewye, Wang, Chittendend, Murphy & The McCreary Centre Society, 2006). In addition, adversity is "[R]eferred to as risk, typically encompassing negative life circumstances that are known to be statistically associated with adjustment difficulties" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p.858). Adversity may include such stressors as: physical and sexual abuse, family substance abuse, violence and frequent moves. As many other researchers have done, I have chosen to combine vulnerability and adversity factors into one conceptualization for this research project as they are all factors that create significant challenges in the lives of individuals.

At the same time, it is important to note that each of the researcher-participants in this study has experienced protective factors that counter the vulnerability and adversity factors in their lives. Protective factors are aspects of one's life and personality that can positively alleviate the impact of adversity and vulnerability factors (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Saewye et al., 2006) and may include: having a connectedness with a positive role model, positive peer relationships, assertiveness, access to school and education, and a sense of safety and security. Table 4 lists the vulnerability, adversity, and protective factors that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 4

Vulnerability, adversity and protective factors

Vulnerability and Adversity Factors	Protective Factors
• Aboriginal stereotypes • Residential school inter-generational trauma and loss • Suicide of friends and family • Peer pressure to smoke, drink and use drugs • Unfamiliarity of big city…sense of being out of place/not belonging • Limited educational opportunities on Reserve • Leaving home for educational opportunities • Low self-esteem	• Engagement in cultural traditions and practices • Willingness to take the risk of leaving home community to access a better education • Healthy self-esteem • A sense of appreciation for and acceptance of parents and family • Appreciation of nature • Expectation that mistakes will be made and acceptance that one may loose their way but that making positive changes is always possible • Support and love of family • Support and encouragement of peers and close friends • Proximity of family and ability to connect with family • Strong, positive role model

As a group, all six researcher-participants have been challenged by adversities from all layers of experience; the individual, relationships, community and culture (Canadian Red Cross, 2006). These fluid levels of adversity and risk are clearly conveyed through researcher-participants' photographs as they wanted their audience to understand what it means to be exposed to negative Aboriginal stereotypes, to the inter-generational, primordial trauma and loss caused by Residential schools, to the effects of numerous suicides of both family and community members, to peer pressure to drink alcohol, smoke and take drugs, and to the struggle with self-esteem. In addition, a particular adversity faced by this group of Aboriginal youth was the limited educational opportunities on Reserves and as a direct result the need to choose whether or not to relocate away from their home communities to access such opportunities.

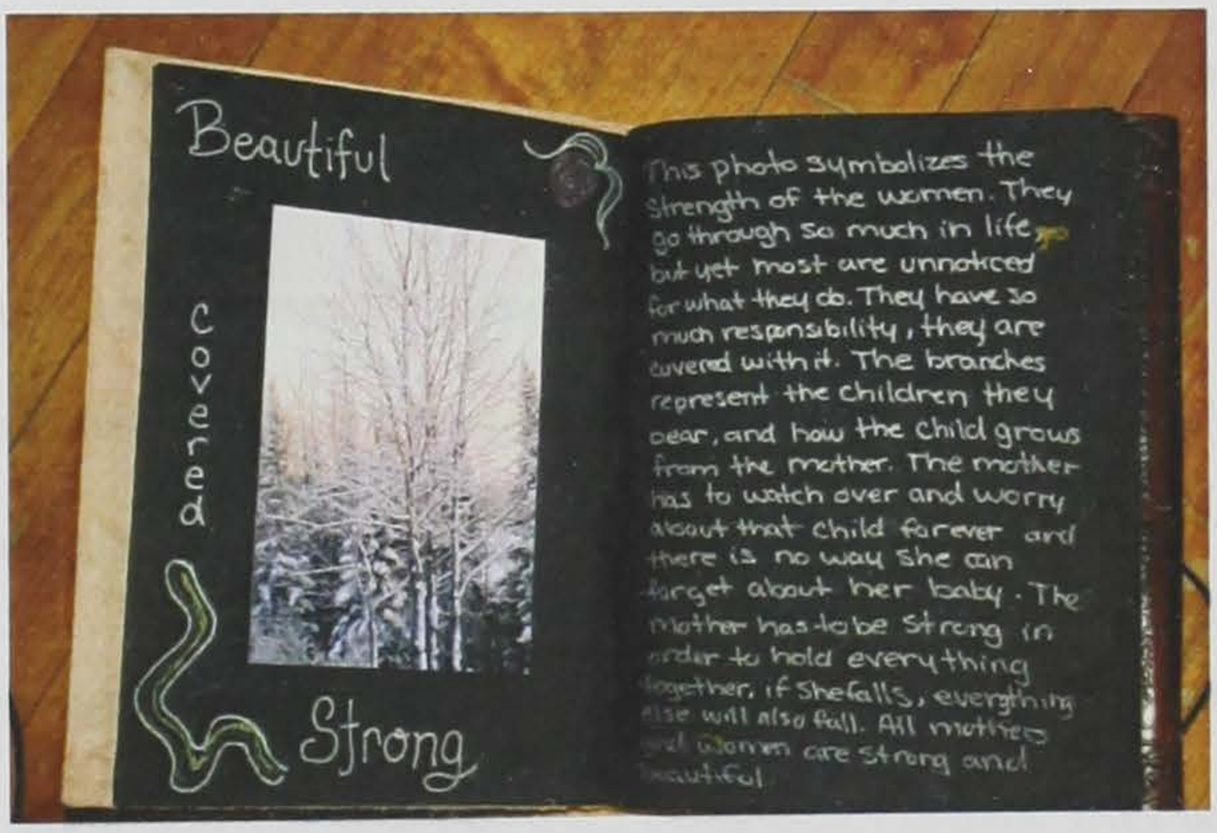
The girls often referred to the limited educational opportunities in each of their home communities. Through various group discussions it became clear that they understood that completing their secondary education in their communities would have a negative impact on their options to go to post-secondary school and pursue a career of their choice. They acknowledged their need to complete high school but were very concerned that the school system on the Reservation could not adequately prepare them for future educational pursuits. Recognizing these limitations, the researcher-participants, with family support, relocated to Timmins, Ontario. This relocation, despite being a positive choice brought with it many adversities. For most, the adjustment to city life meant dealing with feelings of loneliness, unfamiliarity and feelings of being out of place. For some it meant being exposed to negative stereotypical attitudes and caused some to struggle with issues of self-esteem.

This being said, despite all of their experiences with significant adversity, the six Aboriginal adolescent girls that took part in the project displayed overwhelming positive views of their present and future realities; they were a resilient group of young people. This is relevant for us to consider as much of the literature that exists concerning Aboriginal youth is focused on challenges and negative life outcomes as opposed to the recognition of strengths and abilities of Aboriginal youth. Thus, it is important to consider further how the girls in this project adapted to life off-reserve and why they were so successful in this adaptation. The girls' positive adaptation is attributed to the following indicators of resilience that were present in their lives: support systems, cultural engagement, risk-taking, self-esteem, and realism and optimism. Each of these indicators is discussed next.

Support Systems

As in many other studies, connectedness with family, friends and teachers has proven to be a significant protective factor (van der Woerd & Cox, 2003; Luther & Cicchetti, 2000; Knesting, 2008). The researcher-participants in this study recognized the importance of and acknowledged the people in their lives who have supported, loved and guided them. They felt supported by immediate and distant family members, friends, teachers, elders and significant others. Pea 1's photograph of a large tree covered with snow and her written explanation captures the essence of the researcher-participants' appreciation for these very important individuals in their lives.

Photo 19



"This photo symbolizes the strength of the women. They go through so much in life, but yet most are unnoticed for what they do. They have so much responsibility, they are covered with it. The branches represent the children they bear, and how the child grows from the mother. The mother has to watch over and worry about that child forever and there is no way she can forget about her baby. The mother has to be strong in order to hold everything together, if she falls, everything else will also fall. All mothers and women are strong and beautiful."

What is significant here is not simply that the researcher-participants recognized that they have strong support systems but that they actually verbalized their appreciation of these systems. During group sessions the girls often called their parents or siblings to set up transportation or let them know when they would be home. More often that not the conversations ended with "love you". Although this may not seem significant, having worked with adolescents over many years, I was impressed with the researcher-participants' emotional openness. This was particularly evident during the Aboriginal Art and Feast-ival when they invited their parents and family members to participate in the event. The girls were clearly very proud of their work but they were equally proud to have their parents and family members present.

Their emotional openness was also evident throughout the entire group process. Although most were shy by nature, they quickly opened up and shared some of their deeply personal lived experiences. The six researcher-participants were able to trust the group process and each individual involved. There was an atmosphere of mutual respect established within the first two group meetings. The last group meeting was one where everyone shared their feelings about the project; what they had learned about themselves and others; and how much they enjoyed the opportunity to share their own stories.

All six researcher-participants clearly conveyed their understanding that having these strong connections has guided and protected them along their life path. They have developed strategies and skills to show their appreciation for those who supported them such as choosing to share quality time with them during holidays and traditional activities, verbalizing their appreciation, and seeking support from them when needed. This indicates that the researcher-participants trusted that the support will be there when needed and felt safe in exposing their vulnerability.

Cultural Engagement

Similar to Lalonde's (2006) findings, this Photovoice project confirmed that participation in Aboriginal culture is associated with increased resilience. Four of the girls discussed the importance of their culture, and there is evidence in the data that this protective factor is an indicator of resiliency for young Aboriginal girls. Three of the researcher-participants were part of a women's drumming group and regularly participated in traditional cultural events and practiced cultural rituals such as smudging. Engagement in their cultural background appeared to help guide them in their pursuit of a positive and healthy lifestyle. The sweet grass and sage photograph shared by Pea 2 conveys her belief that these two traditional medicines can bring healing and positive energy. As discussed previously, Buzz Gun's participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission meetings helped her better understand her family and Aboriginal people as a whole. She was angry about the past injustices but was ready to learn more about her traditional ways.

The girls have successfully maneuvered "between the two worlds and they situationally decide[d] when to be 'traditional and when to be 'non-traditional' (Frideres, 2008, p.321). Buzz Gunn in particular clearly prides herself on being able to go hunting with her family one-week and the next week to visit New York City. For these four girls, engaging in their culture seemed to provide positive identity development and allowed them to appreciate and even celebrate being Aboriginal without the need to completely reject White society. According to Frideres (2008), these researcher-participants are well nested. Thus, they "can identify with and hold allegiance to small communities (e.g., ethnic groups), while nested within a larger community" (p. 314).

Ali G. and Fluffy Unicorn did not reject their ethnic background but both felt it was important to not simply focus on the fact that they are Aboriginal. Instead, Ali G. wanted to be

known as a unique individual not just as an Aboriginal person. According to Friderers (2008) these two researcher-participants possess "border identity". " This is when identity lies between Aboriginal and White" (p. 322). Coincidentally, these two girls left their home communities during elementary school and have spent a much longer time in Timmins and within the Ontario provincial school system than the four other girls. Perhaps this is why Ali G. and Fluffy Unicorn are able to "cross boundaries" between Aboriginal and White identities fluidly. Their dual identity allows them to fit into a variety of situations. Ali G. conveyed this by stating that she perceives herself as being an original individual with many characteristics and strengths some of which may be attributed to her Aboriginal heritage. Fluffy Unicorn also conveys her need to be "unique" but only once, throughout her scrapbook, makes a reference to anything related to her Aboriginal heritage.

Cultural identity is salient and dependent on situational factors such as geographical, social and political environments (Unger, et al., 2008). The researcher-participants' ability to negotiate their ethnic identity through these various factors can be seen as an indicator of resiliency. As participants in the project, each self-identified as Aboriginal and felt comfortable discussing their ethnicity. Many conversations centered around how their Aboriginal ethnicity has influenced their lives and the challenges and advantages that come with it. As these six girls continue down their life paths they will continue to negotiate their ethnic identity and will be "free to look for ways to express[ing] that identity which suit them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse or individualistic ethnicity" (Frideres, 2008, p.326). They will be free to explore and express their cultural identity through any relevant cultural patterns or organization they choose. The understanding that they can wear their culture as they see fit

indicates that they have a sense of control over their identity and can result in the development of resilient adaptations.

Risk-Taking

In many studies, risk-taking behaviours are seen as adversity factors however, in this Photovoice project risk-taking emerged as an indicator of resiliency, which is consistent with Unger et al., (2008) who addressed this by emphasizing the importance of avoiding generalization of indicators of resiliency. They offered the example of "dropping out" and found that leaving school early can have a variety of meanings. Although leaving school is associated with a negative risk some may drop out as "a response to the oppressive conditions that constrain cultural identity and the development of a healthy sense of self" (p.76). Thus, for some individuals, dropping out of school is an indicator of resilience as opposed to a negative risk-taking behaviour.

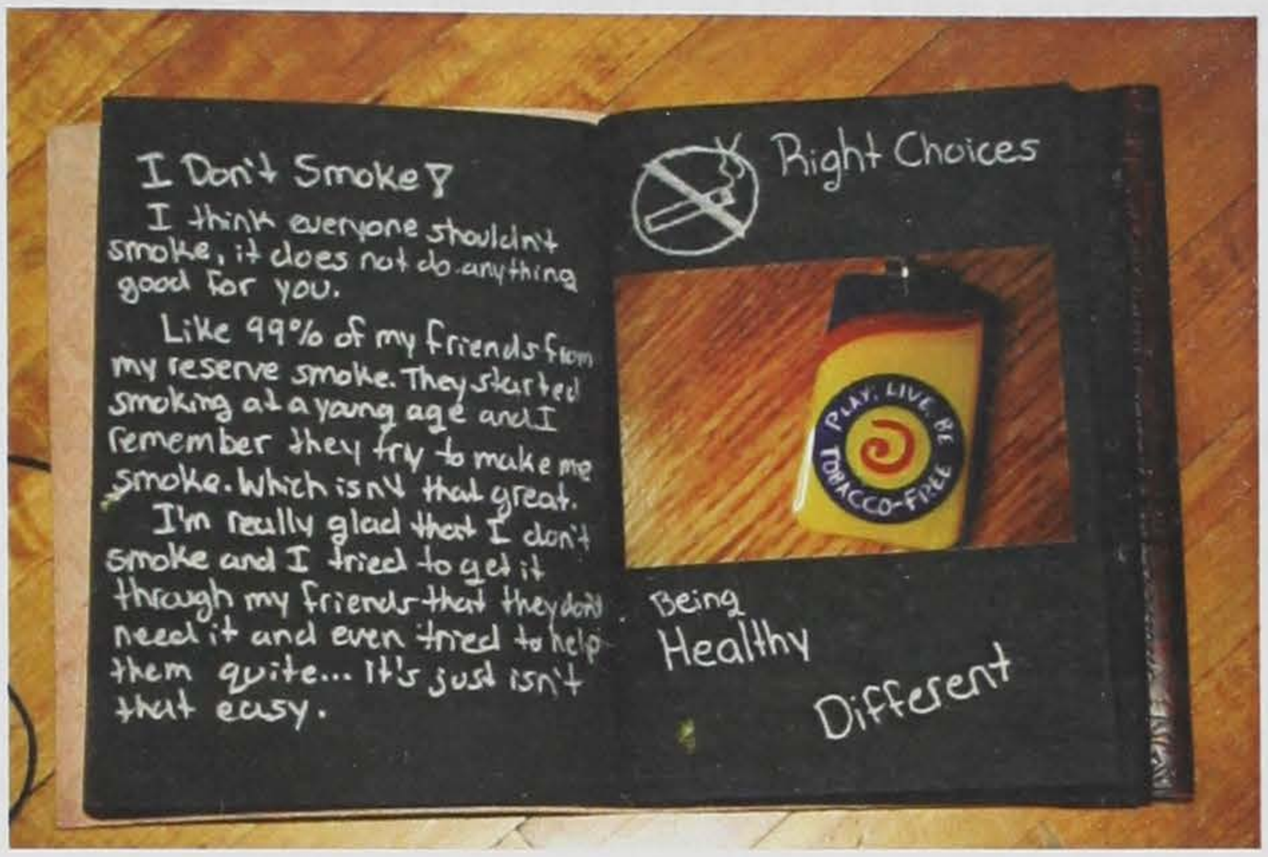
Although pursuing quality education is certainly not "negative", in doing so each researcher-participants risked leaving their home community. They chose to leave the safety and familiarity of their homes to live in a much larger community where many felt out of place, strange, lonely, and stereotyped. Not only does this risk impact them when they are away from their communities it can also have an impact upon their return. In group discussions, the Aboriginal adolescent girls discussed their experiences with their return visits. Fluffy Unicorn stated that: "going home is tough sometimes. Some people call you "towny" or "apple" [red on the outside but white on the inside]. It's a bummer because you don't fit in in the city and then you don't really fit in on the Rez." In keeping with this challenge, the researcher-participants strongly related to Jamie Davey's, the group's co-facilitator, analogy of "crabs in a bucket": as

soon as one individual starts to make positive progress and nears possible escape from the bucket, the other crabs pull him back down.

Some of the girls even admitted to feeling 'guilty' because they left the community and were able to access a variety of opportunities not available on the reserve. Flying Turtle alludes to this by writing: "I see opportunities I get living in the city and not on the reserve. I could see better education and less negative activities. I could see my future, having a great job and being happy. I wish that everyone gets these opportunities, but it's a bit hard to do so living on the reserve…" Despite all of the challenges the researcher-participants faced making this choice, they still found the emotional fortitude to take the risk of leaving their home community.

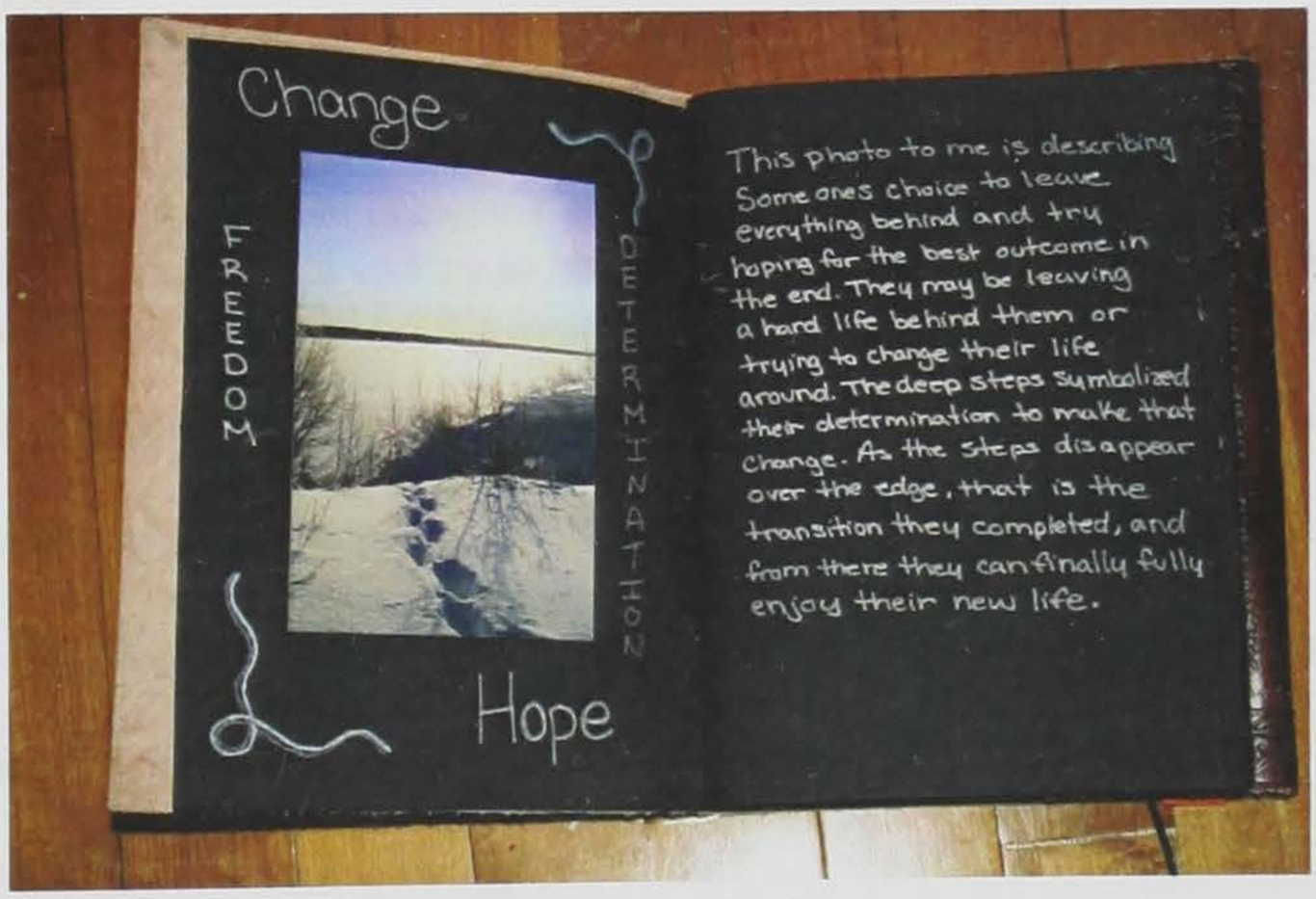
Risk-taking as an indicator of resiliency in this study can be seen through two different perspectives. For many of the researcher-participants not taking a risk is also a risk. To clarify, these six girls were very aware of the Aboriginal stereotypes (dropping out of school, early pregnancy, substance abuse, uneducated and unemployed) and chose not to conform to them. Instead they have stayed in school, they have not abused alcohol or drugs, and they have secured part-time and summer employment. The negative impact of trying to break the stereotypes can be seen in their relationships with their peers who attempt to pressure them into conforming. Again, through various discussions over the course of the study the researcher-participants often shared what it is like not giving in to peer pressure. They often felt rejected by peers and even ridiculed and made to feel guilty. Despite this pressure they understand that staying true to themselves will ensure a healthy and successful future. Flying Turtle conveyed this through her photograph of a key chain that said "play, live, be tobacco-free". Around the photograph she wrote captions: "Right Choices", "Being healthy, Being different".

Picture 20



Pea 1's picture of a snow covered snowmobile trail over a large, frozen body of water encapsulates this concept of risk-taking as an indicator of resiliency.

Picture 21



"This photo to me symbolizes how people tend to want to follow others. They are afraid to make their own trail and lead themselves. Sometimes you try to go off on your own but you become frightened from being lost or going the wrong way. So you turn back.

> Sometimes it's easier to follow someone else's path but it won't take you as far if you made your own. There are so many things in life that people can't explore because they are afraid to leave the road and make their own trail. When you make your own path, you can decide where you want to go and when you want to turn and make a new trail. Sometimes it's best to make your own decisions and not follow people because only you know what you want."

Self-Esteem

In order to take the risks discussed above one must have a strong sense of self and be confident with personal decisions, and/or trust that you're making a good decision. As with all adolescents, the six researcher-participants struggled with their sense of self and confidence. Many saw themselves as different and out of place. However, they also recognized that they had strengths and were able to overcome the challenges they have encountered. They recognized their personal challenges and at the same time embraced their strengths thus created healthy self-esteem. This balanced perception of themselves is an indicator of resiliency as it informs them as to what areas of their personality they need to improve and of which areas they can be proud.

Flying Turtle writes:

> "I'm native and sometimes I feel like this tree which is all alone, everyone looking at it and knowing it's different because it looks a bit odd. I do feel like this tree from time to time, which is not a great feeling to have. But you have to look at yourself beyond that like how it's still beautiful on it's own. You should always see yourself like that "

According to Toulouse (2008) "Aboriginal self-esteem is described as the balanced and positive interconnection between physical, emotional/mental, intellectual and spiritual realms" (p.9). Although the six girls did not convey their perception of self-esteem according to these four specific realms, they did convey it through their recognition of balance; acknowledging personal challenges and embracing strengths.

Self-esteem is also defined by Schiraldi (2009) as "a realistic, appreciative opinion of oneself" (p.25). These six girls are realistic as they are honest about their areas of strength and

challenges but also appreciate and like who they are. They do not possess self-defeating pride where they are arrogant and narcissistic, nor do they possess self-defeating shame where they feel less than human. Their healthy self-esteem will allow them to travel their life journey with the knowledge that they have the personal agency to navigate their way to a healthy and balanced life.

Realism and Optimism

Further enhancing their realistic and healthy self-esteem, the researcher-participants also conveyed a realistic view of their life journeys. Each of the researcher-participants had at least one photograph and written explanation that directly referred to the expectation that they will make mistakes. Not only do they expect to make mistakes they also accept that making mistakes will certainly be part of their journey. Furthermore, they optimistically expect to learn from their mistakes and be able to use that knowledge to grow and help them follow a healthy and successful path. These adolescents are not living life with the belief that nothing will go wrong or that there won't be any bumps along the way and therefore are less likely to be overwhelmed to the point where once faced with challenges, they are not able to get up, brush themselves off and get back on track.

This realistic and optimistic outlook is captured by Pea 1 as she stated: "Sometimes you fall off the main path but you can always make the best of what decision you made…The sun in the background can represent the hope that you can always make it through your mistakes and learn from them." Buzz Gun used a picture of a rainbow over Niagara Falls to convey this outlook. " As the falls are falling I may fall and make mistakes. But as I learn from them I come up as a rainbow. More aware and I learn from my mistakes." Ali G. reminded us that "sometimes,

you need a wake up call to get back on track." Finally, Pea 2 accepted that "there will be rough and bumpy times in your life but if you keep pushing forward there will be better days."

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the vulnerability, adversity and protective factors and discussed resiliency indicators present in the lived experiences of the six researcher-participants. For instance, despite the girls' experiences with loss, geographical isolation and stereotypical attitudes they continued to develop resilient trajectories by making positive decisions to stay in school, to avoid drinking and drug use, and to pursue realistic life goals. The following chapter will address the overall conclusions and implications of this Photovoice project and its findings.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

The broad concept of youth establishing resilient trajectories despite being exposed to adversity has been shown to be relevant to many populations. However, recent research indicates that the construct of resiliency is variable and influenced by a number of factors including culture and the complex social ecologies of families and communities (Filbert & Flynn, 2010; Unger et al., 2008). Therefore, the following will explore implications for social workers and other professionals working specifically with Aboriginal adolescent girls.

The indicators of positive adaptation or resiliency that have emerged from this Photovoice project include: having strong support systems, being culturally engaged, engaging in positive risk-taking behaviours, possessing healthy self-esteem and having a realistic and optimistic world view.

Support Systems

The first of these identified indicators confirmed that the guidance and support of family, friends and teachers enhance an individual's ability to establish resilient adaptations. Growing up in an isolated community with relatively few educational opportunities brings with it many adversities such as a limited exposure to rich learning experiences and limited post-secondary options. Moving away from family, friends and comfort zones can be very difficult. For this particular cohort, moving from small, isolated, homogeneous communities to a significantly larger, more diverse community brought it many adversities and challenges. These challenges emerged at every step of the moving process; as the girls left their home community, as they attempted to integrate into a new community, and as they returned to visit their home community. All six researcher-participants clearly conveyed that had it not been for the guidance and love of their support systems their adaptation to the challenges above would have been far more difficult.

As social workers it is important to be aware of the many factors at play when an Aboriginal youth leaves their isolated community and to live in an urban center. Although not always possible, encouraging or facilitating a move that is accompanied by another member of the individual's support system (such as a parent or sibling), allows for support to be close at hand. If that is not possible then assisting the youth to live with a family member already established in the urban center may be an option.

Whether or not living with a family member is possible, it is still important to facilitate the communication between the Aboriginal youth and members of their support system. Technology makes this possible. If the youth is able to remain connected with their family and friends who have remained in their home community a sense of relationship continuity can be established. Flying Turtle took a picture of her cell phone and stated that "My cell phone is really important to me, it's my communication to my family which I hardly see and also to my friends back home who I never see. I could talk for hours with my sister and friends and never run out of things to say…I miss them so much."

Helping Aboriginal youth maintain communication through technology can mean assisting both the youth and the family back home to purchase a cell phones with appropriate payment plans and facilitate opportunities to learn to text, and use the technology to its full advantage. It may also mean introducing the youth and the members of the support system to the public library where they would have access to email and Skype. For professionals at the school level, a technological communication hub could be established in the high school. A similar hub could be established at the school or community center on the Reserve so that those students and friends they have left behind can share in the Aboriginal youth's journey. Not only could such a service help students who have already left the community it could also help to prepare those

coming after them to be more familiar with possible challenges they may face in the future. Moreover, frequent two-way communication could facilitate the transition back to the Reserve by removing a number of the challenges such as the interruption of relationships and the lack of shared experiences.

Cultural Engagement

The second identified indicator focuses on cultural engagement. The two-fold implications for practitioners and social workers include self-awareness and awareness of client culture. First, practitioners and social workers must become aware of personally held beliefs about stereotypes and overgeneralization of the Aboriginal culture. Second they must endeavour to gain knowledge of the Aboriginal culture as a first step in and developing more culturally-sensitive preventive interventions for Aboriginal youth.

According to Arthur and Collins (2010), it is the counsellor's responsibility to "develop capacity for monitoring personal reactions and for understanding how their socialization may influence their reactions to clients in potentially detrimental ways" (p. 67). As social workers we must become self-aware so that we can understand others without our personal cultural barriers and stereotypes interfering with the establishment of an authentic, culturally-sensitive helping relationship. Once a social worker is aware of their personal views they are capable of developing an unbiased understanding of the Aboriginal culture and their individual client.

Professionals may assist Aboriginal youth in exploring the importance of traditional healing medicines, the meaning of the eagle feather, the long history of Aboriginal people in Canada and other important cultural rituals and beliefs. It is important for professionals working with Aboriginal youth to be aware of all the community programming and cultural activities already in place. Helping Aboriginal youth navigate these opportunities and explore their cultural

identity, without dictating expectations, will encourage them to gain knowledge and purposefully decide what part of their Aboriginal heritage 'fits' with their personal identity.

Finally, social workers will need to espouse a counselling model based on Aboriginal worldviews. For example the model of the medicine wheel encourages balance between the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual factors in one's life and emphasizes interconnectedness rather than autonomy. It is essential that social workers and practitioners are aware that "First Nations people connect with the family, community, culture, nature and spirituality for successful healing" (Arthur & Collins, 2010, p. 276) and therefore must take a holistic approach to working with Aboriginal youth. This would include supporting Aboriginal youth in their absences from school to attend traditional ceremonies.

Risk-Taking Behaviours

A third indicator of resilience focuses on the nature of risk-taking behaviours and contrary to earlier research, in this project risk-taking is demonstrated as an indicator of resiliency. Again, all six girls chose to move away from their home communities and chose to reject the stereotypical expectations of many members of society both on and off Reserve. Although it may not have always come to fruition, these Aboriginal girls risked being ostracized by not conforming to many of their peers' demands or to the negative Aboriginal stereotypes.

Practitioners and social workers must reframe the perception that all risk-taking behaviours are negative. In exploring risk-taking behaviours with an Aboriginal client it will be important to discuss both the pros and cons of such behaviours and understand that risk-taking needs to be examined in context. Being cognizant that risk-taking does not automatically lead to adverse consequences is very important. "Standardizing the measure of children's experience runs the risk of overlooking localized discourses of healthy functioning and pathologizing

(colonizing) the experience of those whose lives are different from the mainstream" (Unger, et al., 2008, p. 178). Approaching each client as an individual and within context, supports anti-oppressive frameworks that attempt to move away from an 'expert' model of service delivery towards one that is more inclusive of clients' experiences and recognizes an individual's ability to cope, resist oppression and establish resilient trajectories (Unger, et.al., 2008).

Self-Esteem

These resilient trajectories can also be established through healthy, balanced self-esteem. As mirrored in previous research, self-esteem is a clear indicator of resiliency. Like most teenagers, the six researcher-participants struggled with their self-worth. They worried about their body image and about the negative Aboriginal stereotypes. However, they appeared to convey a mature acceptance of themselves: there appears to be a balance between identifying and being somewhat self-conscious about their differences and embracing and celebrating those differences. When working with Aboriginal youth it is important to use a strength-based approach as it highlights and draws on the strengths of the individual that they may already recognize. There are so many negatives in their lives that working on what is 'weak' may not be as helpful and further compromise the development of a balanced view of themselves.

Furthermore, social workers and practitioners should have some knowledge of the Aboriginal model of self-esteem. Aboriginal youth need to be made aware of the four realms of self-esteem including the physical, emotional/mental, intellectual and spiritual realms and how these realms are interconnected. Aboriginal youth need to understand how to achieve a balanced sense of self through acceptance of both their challenges and strengths. Therefore, we must help them to identify self-defeating pride as well as self-defeating shame. In order to set an example, social workers must honour who Aboriginal youth are and where they have come from. Therefore

we must actively acknowledge the impact of colonialism and engage and demonstrate respect for Aboriginal teachings, cultural traditions and beliefs (Toulouse, 2008). Not only should Aboriginal youth be respected as individuals but also as members of a rich culture.

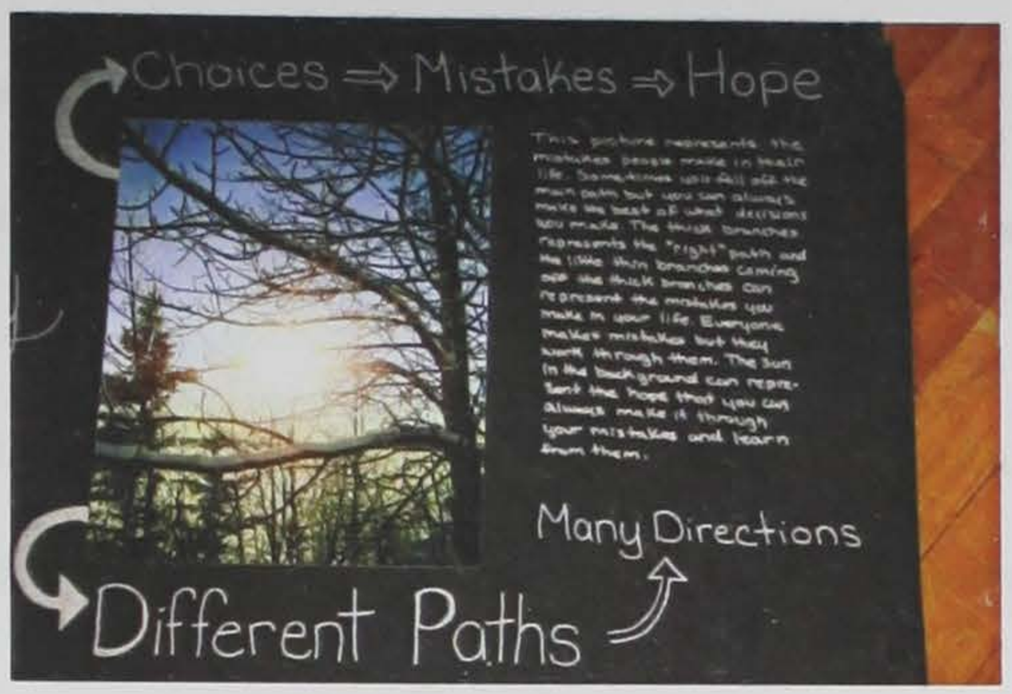
Realistic and Optimistic Attitudes

The final indicator of resilience is the researcher-participants' realistic and positive view of their life journey. Without exception, all six girls conveyed their expectation that they would make mistakes along their journey and they fully accepted their future mistakes as part of their life-long learning process. While this may simply be considered a character trait of an optimistic person, nonetheless, life-long learning is part of the Aboriginal worldview. These six Aboriginal adolescent girls have adopted this worldview by observing family and community members and by reflecting upon their own challenging life experiences thus far.

As practitioners and social workers we must be informed that resilient Aboriginal youth do not see themselves as invincible. Instead they have a realistic view of their life journey as they expect and accept that they will make mistakes in the face of the adversities set before them. Consequently, the starting point with Aboriginal youth may not be helping them accept and take responsibility for their mistakes. Instead it may be supporting and guiding them in learning from their mistakes. By capitalizing on their optimism and the belief that it is possible to work through the consequences of their mistakes it may be possible to re-establish a positive life journey. This worldview is succinctly conveyed through Pea 2's photograph and words:

> "This picture represents the mistakes people make in their life. Sometimes you fall off themain path but you can always make the best of what decision you made. The think branches represent the"right" path and the little thin branches coming off the thick banches can represent the mistakes you make in your life. Everyone makes mistakes but they work through them. The sun in the background can represent the hope that you can always make it through your mistakes and learn from them".

Photo 22



Social workers, practitioners and other professionals such as teachers, guidance counsellors and school administrators must be aware of the nature of this realistic and optimistic worldview. If an Aboriginal youth is unable to sustain engagement in a relationship such as individual or group counselling, cultural activities or even school, it does not mean that they are lost forever. It is paramount that despite a practitioner's frustration with an Aboriginal youth's lack of progress that they must always "leave the door open". Chances are if the Aboriginal youth felt valued and respected, they will be back to try again and if the door is left open so are endless possibilities.

I have spent a great deal of time working with youth and I have been especially privileged to have worked with Aboriginal youth. This research project has offered me an amazing learning experience and those involved must be acknowledged for their support, kindness and willingness to share their lived experiences. The Photovoice process worked incredibly well and facilitated the girls' ability to openly share their experiences. Ali G., Buzz Gun, Flying Turtle, Pea 1, Pea 2 and Fluffy Unicorn will continue on their life journeys, taking a variety of twists and turns, but they will no doubt continue to establish resilient trajectories. I am pleased that this project has captured the true voice of the participants.

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